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AT THE MOMENT OF VICTORY.

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WARD & DOWNEY, PUBLISHERS, LONDON.

AT THE MOMENT OF VICTORY.

BY

C. L. PIRKIS,

AUTHOR OF "A DATELESS BARGAIN," "LADY LOVELACE,"
"JUDITH WYNNE," ETC.

"Some there are who would make the stars spell out the decrees of Fate. Let such an one set his mind to read the big word 'Eternity,' inscribed from end to end of the heavens as on a scroll, and he will find the decrees of Fate written in characters too small for his eyesight."

Essay on "Star-gazing."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

London :

WARD AND DOWNEY,

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V. 1

TO ONE, TO WHOM I PRAY THAT FORTUNE MAY EVER COME
WITH BOTH HANDS FULL,

ELLEN FIELDEN,

Of Nutfield Priory,

I Dedicate this Book,

WITH SINCERE REGARD.

C. L. PIRKIS.

NUTFIELD, 1889.

Rev. Rev Ray 30 Ky 57 Bayle = 31





AT
THE MOMENT OF VICTORY

PROLOGUE.

THE hush of twilight was falling upon the rugged mountains and deep ravines of Santa Maura, a lonely hamlet on the Corsican coast; bird-notes were dying under it; the whirr and stir of summer insect life growing faint; even the wash and swirl of the Mediterranean sounded dreamy and far away under the spell of the "silent-footed Angel-herald of the night." He beckoned to the great, gloomy forests of pine and cork, and they sent forth their shadows in troops and squadrons; laid his soft, dull

hand on the heavy odours of magnolia and myrtle, and they poised in mid-air, knowing that heaven's gates were shut against them ; he drew his veil of mist from east to west across the stormily-purple sky, and the smirch of tawny orange, which marked where a great, golden sun had blazed itself out, was seen no more ; touched with his finger of mystery the figure of a woman descending a mountain path straight into the heart of a ravine, and lo ! she stood transfigured into the likeness of a ghostly visitant from the kingdom of Hades.

That woman might have been Astarte herself for the silent grace of her movements and the dead whiteness of her face, which showed as if moon-washed from out the surrounding dimness.

In the ravine into which she was descending, Night was following hard and fast on the "angel-herald's" step to claim

his own. The mountains rose more gaunt, more drear, more black with every downward step the woman took, until, at length, they seemed literally to pierce the vaporous gray sky with their peaks and turrets.

High over one of the highest of these peaks there shone out through the vapour one star of intense metallic brightness; at the immediate base of this rock, bowered amid olives and vines, stood a small country house, a stone-built *châlet*, surrounded by a narrow strip of garden.

The woman was making her way straight for this *châlet*. At its garden-gate she paused for a moment, looking right and left and in all directions, as if to make sure that her movements were unseen. Unheard they must have been; not ghostly fingers themselves could have unlatched that gate more noiselessly, nor ghostly feet have trodden with a lighter footfall that

garden path, which, winding in and out among arbutus-trees and myrtles, led to the creeper-covered porch of the house. Under this porch had been placed a small table and a rustic reclining seat. On this seat lay a man, locked in heavy slumber.

He was about thirty years of age, and of remarkably handsome appearance, swarthy, mustachioed, and with waves of black, curly hair sweeping across his forehead. His arm pillowed his head. On the ground at his feet, as if carelessly tossed on one side, lay a broad-brimmed hat. On the small table beside him stood a glass about three-parts filled with wine.

This way, that way, all ways the woman looked hurriedly, furtively, with every step she took. Not a sound broke the stillness; not a leaf rustled, nor belated insect flitted. She stood within a hand's breadth of the man now; she held in her breath; then,

slowly, cautiously drawing from beneath her cloak a small phial, she poured its contents noiselessly into the glass of wine.

As she drained the last drop into the glass, she chanced to lift her eyes to the door of the house. It stood wide open, disclosing a stove-place filled with flowering plants, over which, against the wall, hung a large, square mirror.

In that mirror, as the woman lifted her eyes, she could see darkly reflected the whole shadowy garden-picture. She could see, also, her own white face, and white hand which held the small phial.

CHAPTER I.

"WHEN I marry again," said young Mrs. Cohen, with cheeks something the colour of field poppies, and eyes that flashed like diamonds under lamplight, "I shall marry a boy—years younger than I!"

"Quite so," assented her companion, a young man who leaned over the piano at which she was seated; "it is absurd for women to marry men older than themselves!"

"And it is very ridiculous of you," continued the lady, "to imagine because I like to—to——"

"Squabble?" suggested the gentleman.

"Have a little fun with you now and

then, that, therefore, I am willing to marry you."

"My dear Madge, I never for a moment imagined anything of the sort. I took your last 'No' as final six months ago."

"Every one knows that you are years—years—years too old for me."

"Oh yes, years, years, years too old. I am the whole of three years and three-quarters older than you are."

"Every one knows that we haven't the faintest liking for each other."

"Exactly. Every one knows," mimicked the young man, "that we can't be ten minutes in the same room without quarrelling."

"In fact," continued the lady with heightening voice as well as colour, "we are getting positively to detest each other."

"The wonder is that we are ever to be found in each other's company."

“I am positive,” cried Mrs. Cohen, jumping up from her music-stool, “that it was you who said that ‘the library was getting confoundedly hot;’ yes, those were your very words, and you must ‘get out of it.’”

“I am confident it was you who looked over your shoulder—at me—and said, ‘I am going into the music-room to practise, and——’”

“Yes,” interrupted the lady, “that was because I saw Sir Peter looking at me, and I knew how delighted he would be if we crept out of the room together for all the world as if we——”

“Were bent on spooning?”

“And it’s of no use your standing there agreeing with me, as if I didn’t know what I was talking about, or didn’t mean what I said. I repeat, when I marry again, I will marry a boy if I like.”

"Why not? How would you like a nice little middy, about fourteen?"

"He shan't be a day over twenty at any rate, and he shall be obedient and tractable, and I'll call him 'my child.'"

"Ah, he'll like that!"

"And I'll tell him where to get his clothes and what cigars to buy!"

"He'll be sure to buy them, won't he? Look here, Madge, let's give over squabbling, and strike a bargain. I'll engage to look out for this amiable young gentleman, who'll buy his clothes and cigars where his wife tells him, if you'll undertake to marry him as soon as he's found. I can't say more, can I?"

Madge made no reply. She seated herself at the piano once more, struck a chord, ran off a little prelude, and then commenced singing her scales at a very high pitch.

Her voice was a mezzo-soprano, and her high A was a very high A indeed.

Here is the portrait of Mrs. Cohen as she sits at her piano.

Age, twenty-four years. Figure, small and slight. Eyes, hazel-green and deep-seated. Eye-brows, dark and arched—the best feature in her face. Nose, inclined to the classic, but nothing remarkable. Mouth, small and sensitive. Complexion, decidedly sallow, but flushing readily under excitement. Hair, dark brown, cut short, thick and curly.

“Young Mrs. Cohen would be nothing without her curls,” once Madge had heard a dowager say as she left a ball-room. Since then she had diligently cultivated her curls as her one strong weapon in her armoury of charms—an armoury, by the way, of which she had not a very exalted opinion.

“I think you are a remarkably plain

young woman. It is a positive trial to be confronted with you so many times a day," she was in the habit of saying when she looked at herself in her mirror.

And here is the portrait of Lancelot Clive, the young man who stood for a moment listening to the scales and then walked away saying to himself: "Not 'soft, gentle, and low,' to-day, at any rate!"

Age, close upon eight-and-twenty. Good height, well-developed chest. Eyes, bright blue, sparkling and fun-loving. Hair, golden brown, irrepressibly curly, no matter how short it might be cropped, and a complexion bronzed by constant outdoor exercise.

Madge half-turned her head as her companion left the room; but she in no wise lowered the pitch of her A. Madge's vocal scales were a wonderful outlet for her super-

fluous energy. She had recommenced taking singing lessons within a week of her marriage with old David Cohen, the retired diamond merchant; had dropped them in the early days of her widowhood, but had resumed them with surprising vigour during the present year, when she had once more taken up her abode in the home of her girlhood.

“Selling herself for a diamond necklace,” had been Lance’s summing up of the marriage, to which he had received a hasty summons, while pursuing his studies at Oxford. A summons, by the way, to which he did not see fit to respond.

“Doing what is expected of me as Sir Peter’s *protégée* — keeping Lance from making himself ridiculous and blighting his prospects in life,” had been Madge’s version of the case to her own heart, as she stood before the altar vowing to “love,

honour, and obey" a man old enough to be her grandfather, and whose highest conception of happiness was an interval of freedom from gout, which enabled him to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the money article in the daily paper.

Madge was in the very middle of a voluminous shake on her high A when the door behind her opened, and admitted a small, plump old gentleman, who looked as if he were in a very great hurry indeed.

There was something in the mere turn of the handle which made Madge say to herself: "It's Sir Peter," and stop her singing at once.

"Madge," said the old gentleman, "where is Lady Judith?" But he did not wait for an answer. He had crossed the room and had gone out by another door before Madge could open her lips.

She did not, however, recommence her

singing; she knew by experience that he would soon come back again with possibly another question.

He did so come back; this time entering by one of the long French windows of the room, and his question now was:

“Where is Lance?—can’t find anybody this morning, and I’ve so many things to get through, I don’t know which way to turn;” and then he disappeared again.

This small, plump old gentleman was Sir Peter Critchett, sixth Baronet of that name, of Upton Castle, in the County of Cumberland. His plumpness was a remarkable fact if the extraordinary activity of his habits were taken into account. Except at meal-times, he was never still.

“He’s a fortune to me in boots,” Sir Peter’s London bootmaker was wont to affirm, as he packed up the last of the

twenty-five pairs he was in the habit of sending yearly to Upton Castle.

And "He pays the salary of my head man in the carpets he wears out," said the upholsterer, recollecting the number of times that he had been called upon to renew the library carpet in Sir Peter's town and country houses.

Cruikshank would have delighted in sketching Sir Peter's plump, placid face, separated from his bald head by a ridge of stiff, grayish hair, which radiated in hard lines backward from his temples.

Lance had often tried to rival Cruikshank on the backs of old envelopes and magazine covers. Once, in the very middle of dressing for dinner, he had snatched up his hair-brush, and with pen and ink had sketched on its ivory back two very round eyes over-arched by two very astonished-looking eyebrows, a short nose—a mark of exclamation expressed

it exactly—an innocent-looking little mouth, and no chin to speak of. Then, holding the brush sideways to his view, he had discovered what had inspired the idea, namely, the long, stiff hair-bristles which framed the portrait precisely as the stiff, radiating lines of grayish hair framed the original.

By that perverse ruling of fate which so frequently sends people on the scene at the exact moment that their presence is least welcome, Sir Peter had entered Lance's dressing-room just as he had laid down his hair-brush.

"What's this—a picture?" asked the old gentleman, taking up the brush and holding it this way, that way, all ways, so as to get a good view of the sketch.

Lance's presence of mind did not desert him. "It's a kindergarten brush," he replied without moving a muscle. "It's

intended to make children—boys that is—fond of brushing their hair. You can get lots of them at the corner of Oxford Street.”

Not alone in face and feature was Sir Peter remarkable. Fancy a child, with its insatiable love of new toys, its perpetual rebellion against “routine,” its hatred of instruction, and lack of experience, suddenly transferred from pinafore to coat-tails, and transported from its nursery to the society of grown-up men and women! Such an one might have figured as Sir Peter’s prototype in Nature’s workshop.

“He is the Prince of Pierrots,” some one with an eye for character had once said of him. “His *protégés* and his schemes of benevolence are marbles and peg-tops to him.”

Sir Peter rejoiced in an extensive and well-earned reputation for philanthropy.

People were in the habit of coming from all parts of the country to lay before him their divers schemes of charity, and to beseech his patronage for them.

It must be admitted, however, that such beneficent schemes as succeeded in winning his favourable notice, occasionally went into his hands very big and came out of them very small. For instance, a gigantic plan for rescuing from the gutter every little street Arab in London would result in the importation into the Castle gardens or stables of some unkempt, untaught little urchin, who, in the process of his civilisation, would drive head-gardener or groom nearly frantic. And a big scheme for educating the orphan daughters of clergymen of the Established Church resolved itself, in the person of Madge Cohen—then Madge Grant—into the transference of one little forlorn maiden from a scene

of poverty into the luxurious home-circle of Upton Castle.

The forlorn little orphan was now a rich woman, thanks to her marriage with old David Cohen. She had her town house, and her country house, her horses, and her diamonds. But for all that Sir Peter did not feel inclined to wash his hands of her. No ! Just as he had chosen her first husband for her, so was he now desirous of choosing her second ; and it seemed to him, that a better could not be found than Lancelot Clive, the son of his old friend, Colonel Clive, and his own adopted son and reputed heir.

Among his many schemes of benevolence, this held the first place ; and from morning till night his energies were concentrated upon the endeavour to bring about a marriage between these young people, an event which there was every reason to

believe would have come about in the natural order of things, if he could but have been content to let matters take their course.

"If he would but let us alone," Madge sighed, as now for the third time Sir Peter entered the room, and paraphrased his former question somewhat as follows:

"What is Lance thinking of, eh, Madge, to leave you to your own devices in this fashion? Has Lady Judith carried him off to her farm to help her count her latest brood of Brahmapootras—eh?"

Madge, not having yet got her breath back after her late passage-of-arms with Lance, would have liked to answer:

"I haven't the remotest notion where Lance is, and if he never comes near me again to the end of time I shan't care twopence-halfpenny."

That she did not so answer was entirely

owing to the fact that whatever else she might forget, one thing she always remembered, namely, that once she had been Madge Grant, a poor little waif, and dependent upon Sir Peter's bounty.

So she answered composedly, as if she enjoyed being catechised in this personal fashion :

"Lance is, I dare say, in the gun-room, looking over his fowling-pieces, and Lady Judith is not at her farm. I heard her half an hour ago tell your new secretary that she wished to speak to him in the morning-room."

And then she went back to her scales, sighing once more :

"If he would but believe that the world could get on without him !"

By a coincidence, the very same words were at that moment on Lady Judith's lips as she sat in her pretty morning-room,

engaged in conversation with the gentleman who had only the day before been installed as private secretary to Sir Peter.

Yet, conversation is scarcely the proper word to denote talk in which, as the Irishman said, "the reciprocity was all on one side." For Lady Judith was all but stone deaf, and the private secretary, after one or two vain efforts at assent or demur, had yielded to circumstances, and now stood a patient listener to her energetic harangue.

Lady Judith was a woman of between fifty and sixty years of age, and her gait and dress expressed every one of those years in uncompromising severity. She had a supreme contempt for those who sought by the arts of the toilet or graces of manner to negotiate a truce between middle life and old age. Her one pleasure in life was the management of her home

farm, her one duty—from her point of view that is—to play the part of cog to the household wheels which Sir Peter kept in perpetual motion. In face, she was florid and large-featured; in figure, tall and stout.

She towered a good three inches over the person she was addressing—a small, spare man of about fifty, gray-haired and whiskerless, with expressionless features and eyes that looked out of such narrow slits that it was impossible to tell what colour they were.

She had risen from her chair in the course of her oration, and now, fan in hand, stood rounding her periods with sustained vigour.

Her fan was an absolute necessity to her; once set upon “conversation” she never failed to talk herself hot and red in the face. She wielded that fan in no

dainty, coquettish fashion. In her hands it suggested the whirring arms of a wind-mill on a breezy height.

"I suffer so from the heat," she parenthetically informed the private secretary, announcing a fact that must have been evident to the most careless observer.

Then she went back to the main subject of her discourse.

"This talk between us is entirely confidential, Mr. Stubbs," she said, speaking in a high key as if she were addressing some one on top of a church steeple. "Sir Peter has the kindest heart in the world, and a very wide reputation for benevolence. *Entre nous*, I should not be at all sorry if his reputation could be curtailed—this is quite in confidence, you understand—and it occurs to me that by the exercise of a little judgment and discretion on your part—an occasional word put in now and

then, do you see—the multitudinous outlets for his benevolence might be reduced in number. Of course, you will have to use great tact; *entre nous*, Mr. Stubbs, Sir Peter is a trifle obstinate when once he takes a thing into his head. Your predecessor was a man without tact, and a little too fond of hearing himself talk; and, of course, quickly got his dismissal. Well, as I was saying, Mr. Stubbs—but this is quite confidential—Sir Peter has the kindest heart imaginable, but if he could only be made to understand that the world could get on without him——” she broke off abruptly, asking the question:

“What is the matter—toothache?” as an expression of agony passed over Mr. Stubbs’s face.

It was not to be wondered at that Mr. Stubbs should have exhibited a change of feature, for, all unknown to the lady, the

door behind her had opened, and Sir Peter himself had entered the room, and stood listening to her discourse.

It was matter for congratulation that at that moment a diversion was effected by Lance dashing into the room in hot haste, and whispering something into Sir Peter's ear with many a furtive look at Lady Judith.

Mr. Stubbs, being blessed with quick hearing, caught the words :

“Accident on the rails below Lower Upton! Come along at once! I've had the cart brought round. There'll be lots for you to do.”

CHAPTER II.

UPTON CASTLE stood high among the Cuimberland hills, some nine hundred feet above the sea level. Above its gray stone walls the Cuddaw Fell rose in sharp grandeur another nine hundred feet, belittling with its sweeping curves and massive crags the stronghold beneath, which once had held its own with the best of border fortresses, and which successive masters with big purses and luxurious tastes had adapted to the exigencies of modern requirements.

“The mountain belongs to us,” Lance used occasionally to say, looking upward with a measuring eye from the top of

Sir Peter's bald head to the cloud-capped Fell. "Or we belong to it," he would add as an afterthought. "I'm not quite sure that isn't a better way of putting it."

Had any one asked Lancelot Clive, at this period of his career, to put his notions concerning the whole duty of man into a nutshell, he would have replied without a moment's hesitation, "Get as much fun out of everything as you possibly can."

He had a free and easy way of treating the elderly Sir Peter, which at times Madge wondered over, and at times she envied. But then he was a *protégé* of a different stamp to what she had been. His mother, who had died at his birth, had been a Critchett, and his father had been Sir Peter's oldest friend. When Colonel Clive had died suddenly of fever in India, it seemed the most natural thing

in the world for Sir Peter to continue the orphan lad's education, and, when Eton and Oxford were said good-bye to, to instal him at Upton as his adopted son and heir.

"The young fellow was born to good luck," everybody said, although at the same time they were willing enough to admit that things must have been very different with him had Gervase Critchett lived, or had a son.

Gervase Critchett had been Sir Peter's only brother, who, as a young man, had been seized with a sudden desire for wild life in the West. In pursuance of this idea he had gone out to Mexico, had bought a ranche there and had been killed, there was every reason to believe, in one of the numerous, unreasoning insurrections which the history of that country records.

Lance was a thoroughly genial, good-hearted young fellow. He had a lofty way of patronising everybody and everything that came in his way which might have been irritating or amusing, as the case might be, if it had been less genially or unconsciously extended. "Uncle Punch and Aunt Judy" had been his schoolboy nicknames for Sir Peter and Lady Judith—herself, by the way, an Earl's daughter. It was a misfortune for Sir Peter that his wife owned to the Christian name of Judith, it so forcibly suggested the characteristic sobriquet for her husband.

In the same lofty, patronising fashion, Lance would speak of the old Castle as "the dungeon," or "the jail," or more frequently still as the "whited sepulchre," "tolerable for three weeks at a time, insupportable for a fourth."

It was the gray of the mountain-side

which suggested the last unfortunate simile. Seen in the glint and glare of a noonday sun on a summer's day, the old Castle stood out in hard, staring whiteness against the graduated gray of the rocks so tenderly laid on by Nature's practised hand.

But when the summer's sun had sunk behind the Cuddaws, and the red, sunset flames had died out of its windows, the old house seemed to shrink into the mountain-side, and become part and parcel of the shadowy crags. Purple then became the keynote of colour of the whole landscape.

An artist sketching it might have done without his reds and yellows, but his purple he must have had, or his picture would have lacked that subtle yet everywhere-present charm of mystery, which only the shadowy purple could impart. There it was, deepening the gray of the mountain,

the silver of the overhanging mist, flashing darkly out of the sheen of the distant lake, clouding the blue of the thickset pine-wood, and finding its focus in the foreground of the picture in the luxurious heather which spread itself in straggling patches over hillside and valley.

That valley seemed to stretch away into a limitless distance, until it kissed the horizon. Lower Upton, with its new railway station and few scattered cottages, lay hidden somewhere among its copses.

Lower Upton was about seven miles distant from the Castle "as the crow flies," but a good nine miles if the windings of a steep, rocky road be taken into account. That was a nasty bit of road, especially at midday under a scorching sun, with Uncle Peter "in good form," as Lance was apt to phrase it, on the box seat.

"Uncle Peter" was in uncommonly

“good form ” on the morning when he and Lance set off together for the scene of the railway disaster ; that is to say, he made the nasty bit of road seem double its length with an incessant flow of interruptions, or rather what would have been such if Lance had not been wary.

“ Lance,” said the old gentleman so soon as they were outside the Castle gates, “ it has only just struck me that we might have sent a man on to Carstairs to tell the doctors there. Of course, old Broughton will be on the spot, but he may want additional help. We had better turn back and leave a message.”

“ All right ! ” said Lance, touching up his horses, not turning their heads, “ we’ll leave a message for Aunt Judy at the keeper’s cottage as we go along.”

A message was left at the keeper’s cottage, and Lance rattled along over the

flinty road for another half-mile. 'Then a second idea "struck" Sir Peter.

"It has just occurred to me, Lance," he said, with a sudden start that would have shaken the nerves of a timorous "whip," "that it would have been as well to have left word for the wagonette to be sent down after us ; it might serve instead of an ambulance. Just turn the horses' heads. It's only a question of a quarter of an hour."

"Ah, that will do at the next cottage—Turvey, the mole-catcher's. We'll send a message back by one of his small boys," answered Lance calmly as before, and again whipping up his horses.

Then Sir Peter had cramp first in one leg, then in the other, and insisted upon getting down to "walk it off."

Finally, within half a mile of Lower Upton, his third and last "idea" struck him.

"I do think, Lance," he said, getting

more and more cheery as they neared the scene where he supposed his energies would be called into requisition, "it would have been a good idea to have told them to send down with the wagonette something that could be converted into an ambulance—wonder it didn't occur to you when you left the message at Turvey's. The sufferers may be too much injured to stand the jolting of——"

Here Lance pulled up sharply. "Ho, there!" he shouted to a man who chanced to be coming along with a cart of hay.

"Who-a, my lass," said the man to his horse, and stood at attention.

"You're going up the Cuddaw Road, I suppose?" queried Lance. "Well, you'll meet Sir Peter's wagonette coming down. Tell the man to turn back, take the doors off the stables, and bring them along with him—they're wanted for ambulances."

“No, no!” shouted Sir Peter. “There are plenty of hurdles down at the farm. Are you out of your mind, Lance! Do you hear, my man, hurdles from the farm.”

But it was exceedingly doubtful whether the man heard him, for Lance had once more touched up his horses, vowing that unless they put speed on, they might as well turn back at once. Then he drew a fancy picture of the scene of disaster, which, possibly, the railway station presented; of wrecked carriages lying along the line, sufferers in various stages of mutilation stretched on the platform awaiting succour.

Sir Peter subsided into tranquillity, as Lance knew he would, before the prospect of so vast a field for his energies. He buttoned up his coat, so as to be tight and trim, and ready for action.

“If I were you I would let your shirt-

sleeves alone," said Lance, noticing a side glance which the old gentleman gave to his wristbands.

Sir Peter looked like a naughty child forestalled in some mischievous idea.

"But we'll take our rugs with us, Lance," he said, "they'll be sure to come in 'useful one way or another."

But alas for Sir Peter's forethought and prognostication! The little railway station presented its usual picture of rustic quietude as Lance drew rein at it.

The station-master came forward to reply to Sir Peter's queries. The accident, he explained, had occurred five miles down the line. A number of coal trucks had been overturned through the breaking of some coupling irons, and, as the line could not be cleared before night, all traffic through Lower Upton was stopped for that day.

“The worst damage,” he went on to say, “was the inconvenience that passengers travelling North had been put to. They had been compelled to alight at Lower Upton, and had had the choice offered them of remaining there for another twenty-four hours, or, of travelling back twenty-five miles of their road to Carstairs, whence they could travel North by various routes. Most of the passengers had adopted the latter course—all in fact except one—a young lady,” here he glanced towards the waiting-room of the station, “who appeared to be greatly annoyed at the delay to her journey, and who seemed unable to make up her mind what to do. She spoke with a foreign accent,” the man farther stated, “and he was not sure whether she thoroughly understood his explanation of how easily her journey might be continued by travelling back twenty-five miles.”

“Capital!” said Lance, “there’s something for you to do after all, Uncle Peter. Of course we’re bound to offer our services to the young lady. We can drive her anywhere she would like within twenty miles, or take her to the Castle for the night and bring her back in the morning when the line’s clear. ‘Greatly annoyed,’ ‘foreign accent.’ Why, I’m beginning to feel like Don Quixote already. Come along.”

They went into the waiting-room to see a tall, slight young lady standing there with a small portmanteau at her feet. She wore a long gray travelling cloak which reached to the hem of her dress, a gray beaver hat, and gray gossamer veil which entirely hid her features.

CHAPTER III.

THE hot afternoon began to wane. Lady Judith and Madge drank their tea out of doors under a spreading cedar, which made a shady nook on the lawn. Madge brought out a writing-folio with her, thinking it possible that Lady Judith might fan herself to sleep, as she often did on a summer's afternoon, and thus give her the opportunity of getting through a little of her correspondence.

Lady Judith, however, was not disposed for sleep, but for "conversation," in her sense of the word, that is. The number and variety of topics she touched upon while she and Madge stirred their tea, sug-

gested a comprehensiveness of knowledge that would have done credit to the compiler of "Enquire Within Upon Everything."

Madge, a well-seasoned listener, leaned back in her rocking-chair, indulging in her own train of thought under cover of an occasional sympathetic remark, which Lady Judith as often as not did not hear.

Sir Peter and his fads, as might be expected, received the lion's share of the lady's criticism; thus:

"My dear, if it had not been for me the Castle would long ago have been turned into an orphanage or almshouse, or perhaps into a lunatic asylum—though, for the matter of that, it's half-way on the road to one now at times, with the queer sorts of people he brings into it." And so forth for a good twenty minutes, with brief interludes for fan or tea-cup.

Lance and his misdoings next received, as it were, a passing glance.

“Where is the use,” she queried, pathetically, “of my saying to him as I do every day of my life, ‘Lance, do your best to keep Sir Peter from making himself ridiculous’? Or of his saying to me, as he does every day of his life, ‘Aunt Judith, I go to bed at nights with Uncle Peter on my mind, I get up in the morning with him on my mind, and he is on my mind all day long’? when he never so much as lifts a little finger to keep him out of mischief. My dear, it’s my belief that that young man looks upon life as nothing more than a big jest from year’s end to year’s end. He’d sell his soul any day of the week, and think himself well paid if only he could get a laugh out of the bargain.”

The mere mention of Sir Peter’s name had been guarantee to Madge of close upon

half an hour for uninterrupted indulgence of thought. During the recapitulation of his offences she had been mentally concocting an answer to a letter received from her lawyers that morning, asking for instructions on certain matters connected with the Cohen property.

"Dear sirs," she had been writing in intent, "I wish the bonds and deeds you speak of were at the bottom of the sea. Do just whatever you like about them. And as for the house at Redesdale, it may be unlet to the end of time for anything I care——"

She had got so far, when Lance's name high over her head, in Lady Judith's falsetto, brought her letter-writing to a halt. For once in her life her ideas were in unison with Lady Judith's.

"Sell his soul for a laugh—yes, that was Lance to the backbone," she said to

herself a little bitterly. "From morning till night playing at life instead of living it. Never in earnest—never even seeming in earnest. If he had only seemed ever so little in earnest six months back when he had made her his offer of marriage, how gladly she would have said 'Yes' to it, instead of meeting it with the indignant exclamation, 'Sir Peter told you to ask me.'" Then she drifted into cloudland again, picturing a series of pleasant possibilities, if Lance, for once in his life in downright solemn earnest, were to come to her and say: "Madge, I forgive you for doing what you were bidden and marrying money-bags. I loved you then, I love you now, I'll love you always." Ah! how gladly would she pour out those money-bags at his feet! What a heart's delight the counting of her gold, the management of the Cohen property, would be to her then.

And as for lawyers' letters, they might come every day of her life, and be welcome as love-letters, if only she had the privilege of tossing them over to Lance, and saying : " You'll settle all that, won't you ? "

When her wing wearied and she came down from cloudland, Lady Judith had taken Mr. Stubbs, the new secretary, for her text, and was descanting upon his qualifications, or otherwise, for his duties.

" It's my belief, my dear," she was saying when Madge's sense of hearing came back to her, " that Sir Peter only engaged him because he heard from the people who recommended him at Carstairs—I forget their name—that he had been unfortunate in business matters all his life through. He has been twice through the Bankruptcy Court ; at one time he was a stockbroker ; then he turned lawyer's clerk ; then he went into a newspaper office at Liverpool ;

after that into an auctioneer's office ; and after that—after that," this repeated with a contemptuous emphasis, "he comes to Upton Castle, and acts as private secretary to Sir Peter !" Here Lady Judith paused to fan herself, and to get breath to go on again.

"He wouldn't be so bad-looking if only he would open his eyes wider," said Madge, feeling she was expected to say something. "As it is, it makes me sleepy to look at him."

Lady Judith only caught a part of her sentence, and characteristically understood it to refer to Sir Peter.

"Open his eyes a little wider !" she exclaimed, shrilly. "I wish to goodness he would ! He would see then how people impose upon him, and lay traps for him to walk into, and then make fun of him behind his back. But there—one might

as well tell a blind man not to run his head against a post as tell Sir Peter to open his eyes and look an inch in front of him."

They had now travelled in a circle back to their starting point—Sir Peter, and his delinquencies. Madge mechanically returned to her unanswered lawyers' letter. "I don't care two straws," her thoughts resumed, "whether the house at Redesdale is let or unlet, or whether the farmers are paying half-rents or whole rents——" She had got so far when the sound of wheels coming slowly up the steep drive, which led through the grounds to the Castle, made her look up, to see Lance in the distance, waving to her from his high dog-cart.

She looked and looked again. Was that Sir Peter seated behind? Where was the groom, then, and who was that, all in gray, seated beside Lance on the box-seat? were

the questions which rapidly presented themselves to her for an answer.

Evidently they suggested themselves to Lady Judith also, for she broke off abruptly, shaded her eyes with her hands, and inquired: "Whom have they brought back with them? Can you see, my dear?"

Madge shook her head. "Another *protégée*, I dare say," she answered. But the way in which she spoke the word "*protégée*" was a protest against her use of it. The emphasis she laid on "another" seemed to say: "I least of any one in the world ought to throw stones from out my glass-house."

Sir Peter, in spite of his short legs, was out of the cart before Lance. He crossed the lawn towards the ladies in a very great hurry, while Lance followed at a more leisurely pace, accompanied by the young lady in gray—Madge could see

that she was young, by the slimness of her figure, and the grace of her walk.

He came up looking hot, and a little out of breath. "My dear," he said, addressing his wife, "you heard of the accident at Lower Upton. The young lady we have brought back with us had no chance of continuing her journey to the North for another twenty-four hours; so I told her you would be delighted to receive her till——"

Lady Judith arose from her seat erect and stately.

"I want to know," she said in an authoritative voice, "whether there are any more coming. I heard that the wagonette had been ordered to follow."

Evidently she had had visions of the wagonette returning packed with lame, maimed, halt, or otherwise injured individuals.

"No, no, no," and Sir Peter shook his head vigorously to emphasize his noes; "only this young lady, I give you my word. Let me introduce her to you."

A few steps behind him, Lance was presenting the lady in gray to Madge.

Madge had left her rocking-chair and the shade of the spreading cedar, and stood in the glare of the sunlight on the lawn. Lance stood facing her, with the glint of the sunshine on his curly hair, and its gleam in his bright blue eye. Between them stood the young lady, tall and shadowy in her gray garments.

"She came like a shadow between us; I felt my blood chilled," was the description Madge gave of this meeting in after days.

At the moment, however, she merely thought to herself:

"Why doesn't she lift her veil? Does she intend suddenly to startle us with a

blaze of beauty? or is it perhaps because, like me, she isn't proud of her face, and prefers keeping it hidden as much as possible?"

As if conscious of Madge's thought, the young lady at that moment raised her veil, and dared the unshadowed light of the blazing summer sun.

Madge stood looking at her wonderingly.

The face that fronted her, albeit one likely to attract an artist's pencil, was not of a type easy to class. The features—so far as nose, mouth, and chin went—though fairly regular, were unpronounced; the complexion was of a dead, unvarying white, which was doubly accentuated, first by coral-red lips, next by black, straight bars—not arches—of eyebrows, and a thick band of black hair drawn straight across her forehead. The eyes Madge could not see, for the young lady kept her full white

lids downcast. It was a face which might attract, and a face which might repulse, according to circumstances; but whatever it might be, it was not a face to be seen one moment and forgotten the next.

"What a peculiar-looking young woman," thought Lady Judith, putting up her eye-glass and staring at her uncompromisingly.

"Eh, I had no idea she was half so handsome behind her veil," thought Sir Peter, taking a steady survey.

"She would make a grand Cleopatra if her eyes are as black as her brows," thought Lance.

"She might sit for the portrait of Jael, who drove the tent-peg through tired Sisera's forehead," said Madge to herself, as far off as ever from answering her own question as to the young lady's beauty.

Evidently she did not mind being looked at, for her face showed not the faintest sign of embarrassment.

But, whether intentionally or otherwise, she avenged herself for Lady Judith's eyeglass.

"Is that your housekeeper?" she asked, turning to Madge, and speaking in a slow, deep voice, with an unmistakably foreign accent.

As she spoke she lifted her full white lids, and Lance saw not the black eyes her hair gave promise of, but large dark-gray ones.

How Sir Peter, at that moment, thanked Heaven for his wife's deafness!

"That is Lady Judith Critchett," answered Madge, stiffly.

"What does she say?" asked Lady Judith, conscious that she was an object of attention to the young lady.

"That she is delighted to make your acquaintance," said Lance, right into Lady Judith's ear.

"Ah, yes," said Sir Peter, drawing a full breath of relief, "let me present you to my wife, Miss—Miss Rosalie," he began, hesitatingly.

"Jane," corrected the young lady.

The incongruity of the name with the face struck Madge.

"Ah, yes, Miss Jane—Jane——?" went on Sir Peter, interrogatively.

"Jane Shore," answered the young lady.

The incongruity of the name seemed to vanish at once.

The dressing-bell at that moment rang out its reminder. Madge thought it best to end an ungracious situation graciously.

"If you will come with me," she said, addressing Miss Shore, "I will show you to your room, and send my maid to you."

“Thank you,” was the reply, in slow, halting phrases, which seemed to imply that the English tongue was scarcely mastered. “I will not trouble you to send a maid. I have been travelling for two whole days. Will you give me a bed? It is that I want, not dinner. I am tired—nearly to death.”

And the three last words were spoken in a tone that set Lance’s brain wondering, his heart pitying.

CHAPTER IV.

“How can you let him make himself so ridiculous?” asked Madge of Lance, after dinner that night, as together they stood at one of the long drawing-room windows, watching the crimson after-glow fade from the cloud-mountains in the sky, and the night-blue slowly spreading athwart the valley.

“Him! Who, what?” asked Lance, starting as if suddenly aroused from a reverie.

“Why, Sir Peter, of course. Why did you let him bring an utter stranger into the house in this way? A word from you would often prevent these foolish things,

yet you never speak that word," she said, echoing Lady Judith's lament.

She spoke in low tones. That drawing-room owned to four windows and three doors, and there was no knowing but what Sir Peter might enter by one of them at any moment.

Lance shook himself free from his thoughts.

"Now I like that, Madge," he began, laughingly. "You know Uncle Peter as well as I do—when once he has taken a notion into his head, not the Lords, and the Commons, and the whole bench of Bishops combined, would prevent him carrying it out."

It seemed as if the mantle of Lady Judith had temporarily fallen upon Madge's shoulders—she was not to be mollified. Lance's laugh, too, did not mend matters.

"It would be bad enough," she went on, "if you stood by and said nothing; but

when you absolutely carry him off to the scene of a railway accident for the whole and sole purpose of——”

“Giving him something to do,” finished Lance. “My dear Madge, I wonder how many times in your life you have said to me, ‘Give him something to do or he’ll drive us all mad.’”

“Yes, but not such a something as this. If you must bring people into the house, bring men whom you can entertain, not women who will be left on our hands.”

Lance eyed her curiously. Madge seemed more disturbed than so trifling an incident warranted.

Again he tried to laugh the matter off. “You don’t mean to say you’re hard-hearted enough to wish we had left this poor girl to sleep at the railway station? You know there’s not an inn even at Lower Upton at which a lady could put up.”

"Why didn't she go on with the other passengers to Carstairs? There were more people than she, I expect, who came down by her train."

"She hadn't made up her mind what to do when Uncle Peter and I drove up on the look-out for——"

"Forlorn, beautiful young women," finished Madge, sarcastically.

"Exactly. And finding what we went out to seek, what could we do but——"

"She is not beautiful," interrupted Madge, vehemently. "Her face has a history written on it, and it is not a good one."

But even as she said the words the thought in her heart was: "I would give all the Cohen diamonds and every penny I have in the world to have such a face."

Lance put on a serio-comic expression.

"Ah! every one knows, Madge, that you never mean one-half you say," he said,

as thoroughly bent on teasing as if he were a schoolboy and Madge a screaming, refractory parrot.

“I mean every word I say ; and I repeat, her face is an evil one and repulses me. Somehow it makes me think of midnight bridges and dark rivers, and——”

But at this moment a door opened, and Sir Peter entered. He stood for a moment looking about him.

There was Lady Judith, asleep in a low chair, her head thrown back, her big fan drooping from her hand, her face crimson as usual. Evidently she had fanned herself into the arms of Morpheus. There were Madge and Lance whispering together in the window recess, for all the world like a pair of lovers.

“Delightful !” thought the kind-hearted old gentleman. “Just as it should be ! Capital match ! Most suitable in every way !”

And as he could not bring himself to interrupt the love-making of the young people, he crossed the room on tip-toes, and went out by the opposite door.

Madge seemed instinctively conscious of Sir Peter's thoughts.

"Why did he run away like that?" she queried, plucking nervously at the posy of yellow roses which she wore in her waistband.

"He'll be back again in another minute," said Lance, composedly.

And sure enough back again he came.

This time through the window, the third from the one at which Lance and Madge were standing.

"Don't disturb yourselves," he said, standing in front of the two and falling into a backward and forward heel and toe motion he frequently adopted, and which suggested the idea that he had sud-

denly been put upon rockers. "Don't disturb yourselves. I only came in for a moment to say that—that——"

He paused abruptly. Honestly he had nothing to say. If he had spoken out his thoughts he would have said: "The house is horribly still; it is time I set some one or something stirring."

"That it was a fine evening," suggested Lance.

"Ah, yes, a fine evening! That was it. And—and it was a disappointment our guest couldn't sit down to dinner with us." This was a sudden thought and he jumped at it.

Madge here plucked so viciously at her roses that two or three fell to the ground.

Lance picked them up and presented them to her in the most lover-like attitude he could command.

Sir Peter smiled benignly on him. "Ah,

‘Gather your rosebuds while ye may.’ You know what the old song says, eh?” Here he gave Lance a sly little dig in the ribs, and forthwith vanished by another window.

Madge turned sharply upon Lance. “Why do you do it?” she queried, hotly. “Why do you make believe and make him think that—that——”

“That—that——” mimicked Lance. “My dear Madge, all my telling in the world wouldn’t convince Uncle Peter that we were not desperately in love with each other. You try your hand at telling him and see what will come of it.”

“You tell him things as if you didn’t mean them—you ought to—to make him understand that—that——” Again she broke off, and again Lance mimicked her.

“That—that you haven’t the faintest liking in the world for me, that, perhaps,

you may marry a chimney-sweep to-morrow ; but Lance Clive—never. Well, I'll do my best to make him understand."

"I never said such a thing ; you've no right to put words into my mouth," she cried, vehemently ; and then, as if fearful of losing her self-control, she half-hid her face in her yellow roses, and left the room.

"If things could only have been different five years ago !" she said to herself as she closed the door behind her. "If I had but been free, as other girls, to choose or to refuse !"

CHAPTER V.

LANCE remained standing at the open window. A half-amused expression flitted across his face.

“How ridiculous of Madge,” he thought, “to lose her temper over a girl she has only seen once in her life, and whom most probably after to-morrow she’ll never see again !”

Presently the half-amused expression on his face gave way to a more thoughtful look.

“In spite of her ‘No,’ six months ago,” he thought, “I believe she has a faint liking for me. I wonder if I asked her a second time what answer I should get !”

The wonder was one to entertain, not to dismiss as a passing thought. So, with a glance at the still peacefully-sleeping Lady Judith, Lance took his cigar-case out of his pocket and strolled through the French window on to the outside terrace. The evening air was cool and balmy. The garden showed weird and mysterious under the long night-shadows which were beginning to troop forth from beneath the trees and Castle walls.

Lance went strolling in leisurely fashion along the dim paths, his thoughts as serene and limpid as the dark stretch of summer sky overhead. It did not require the miserable rushlight of a young man's vanity, nor that stronger light which experience of women's ways gives, to read clearly Madge's apparently capricious conduct, when once a steady attention was accorded to it. She would be wooed for

herself, not for her wealth ; wooed, too, in downright passionate earnest, not by a lukewarm suitor edged on by a lively guardian. This was what her alternate sweetness and sourness, her petulance and playfulness meant if they meant anything at all.

And after all, so Lance's thoughts ambled, in leisurely time to his leisurely steps, there was no reason why Madge should not be thus wooed. Hers was a sweet and attractive personality when once one had learnt to pierce that outer armour of caprice wherewith temperaments like hers, rendered super-sensitive by circumstances, frequently clothe themselves.

When Sir Peter had brought her, a shy little maiden of twelve, to Upton Castle, Lance had made a fine pet and plaything of her. Later on, as she had developed into the girl in her teens, he had been honestly in love with her. Later on still, when

Sir Peter had taken her future in hand and considered he had done a thoroughly good day's work in marrying her to old David Cohen, Lance had seen fit to indulge in the bitterness of a rejected suitor, and to anathematise her for a heartless flirt, although at the same time he had gone out of his way to convince "Uncle Punch and Aunt Judy," and all the world beside, that he and Madge had never been more than brother and sister to each other. During Madge's short married life he had seen next to nothing of her; but when, on the death of her husband, she shut up her town house, let her country house, and came back to the home of her girlhood, he was willing enough to listen to Sir Peter's suggestion that "he and Madge were made for each other," and to do his best to obliterate from his recollection that short period of her wedded life.

Thinking over his offer of marriage now in this dreamy half-light, he said to himself that he did not wonder at the impetuous "No" it had received, considering what a small amount of energy he had displayed in the making of it. Doubtless it would have met with a different reception if Sir Peter had left him alone to make it in his own fashion, instead of jogging his elbow, as it were, morning, noon, and night, to do at a rush a thing which could have been far better accomplished by successive steps.

Lance finished his cigar, but still lingered out there among the shadows and heavy flower - scents, indulging now in this pleasant thought, now in that. The Castle grounds wound downwards with many a steep pathway right into the valley, where, among the stalwart pines and drooping larches, stood the keeper's cottage and the

home farm. It occurred to him that there was something he particularly wished to say to the gamekeeper about a bit of land that was to be enclosed for cover that year; so, in spite of the growing dark, he decided to make his way down to the cottage at once, lest to-morrow's occupations might once more sweep the matter from his mind.

The shadows closed around him as he descended the incline. Behind him lights were beginning to show in the Castle frontage through its trellis-screen of sycamore and cedar. Overhead the smirched gray of twilight had given place to the sapphire-blue of a night-sky pierced with a hundred thousand "star windows to let out heaven's light." His downward path showed gray in front of him, dimly tessellated with the faint shadows of the planes and wild plum-trees which grew

at intervals on either side. Then for a brief distance the path wound upward again, with a wood on one side, and a high thorn hedge on the other. Beyond this hedge a bare brown upland rose, treeless and shadowless.

A gap in the hedge, where the last hunt had ridden through, framed for Lance a bird's-eye view of this sterile waste. It showed him something else beside the dry stunted turf and a few scurrying rabbits—the figure of a woman sharply outlined against the night-sky. She half-sat, half-crouched, with arms encircling her knees. She wore no hat, her hair was tightly coiled about her head, her face was upturned to the heavens.

Lance was neither poet nor painter; but nevertheless the weirdness and mystic beauty of the scene made itself felt. That crouching sibyl-like attitude, the wildly

desolate surroundings, seemed to transport him straight from the Cumberland hillside to classic ground, peopled with the queen-prophetesses of ancient myth. If the woman had suddenly tossed her arms on high, and burst into some wild invocation, it would have seemed all in keeping with the ghostly scene.

But she did nothing of the sort. Instead, as if conscious of his presence, she suddenly turned her face towards him. Then Lance, in utter amazement, recognised, by the light of the stars, the pallid face and jet-black hair of Miss Jane Shore.

He was through the hedge in a moment, and in another was standing beside her on the shadowless waste.

“Miss Shore!” he exclaimed. “What are you—can you be doing out here at this time of night?”

The girl did not start nor move from

her crouching attitude. For one instant her large gray eyes were lifted to his face with a hunted, forlorn look in them which made his heart ache for her.

"Looking at the stars," she answered, dreamily, absently. Then she let her gaze sweep the sky once more.

There was no moon ; the bare upland on which they stood showed, in the half light made by the summer sky and myriad stars, a ghostly patch from out the surrounding gloom of dense hedges and denser woods. The girl's upturned face seemed more like some marble mask than a thing which had life and could redden and smile ; the black sweep of hair across her forehead heightened its pallor into an almost death-like whiteness, while the gray garments which clung to her showed like so much dim shroud-like vapour from which she was just emerging.

An artist seeking an impersonation of a fallen star, looking upward to its lost place in the heavens, might have found his ideal realised here.

Lance, in his young, robust flesh and blood, felt himself in some sort out of keeping with his environment.

For a moment he felt tongue-tied ; then, as if to break a spell, he made his voice to be heard.

“If you are fond of star-gazing,” he said, “you ought to go to St. Cuthbert’s churchyard—it stands on a promontory—you can get a splendid view of the heavens there, right away over the Irish Sea.”

Treeless though this upland was, the expanse of sky it commanded was comparatively circumscribed, on one side by the thick wood which stood on yet higher ground, on the other by the majestic crags and headlands of the Cuddaws.

Only the first part of his sentence seemed to catch her ear.

"Fond of star-gazing," she repeated, slowly. "Is one fond of gazing on the faces of one's enemies? The stars are my enemies. I hate—hate them."

The last words were said with a vehemence that left no room for doubt as to their sincerity.

Lance tried to be comfortable and commonplace. "Pardon me," he said, "then why do you come out here with nothing between you and the sky, when you could so easily, by drawing your curtains, shut out the faces of your enemies?"

She answered his question circuitously. "You ask your friend to tell you your fortune; he will say pleasant things to you—he will lie to please you. You ask your enemy; he will speak truth to you—the stars cannot lie."

The effort with which she spoke the English tongue was marked in this sentence.

“For all that, or rather in spite of all that, I don’t think I should feel disposed to neglect the society of my friends for that of my enemies,” he answered, lightly, but feeling all the time that his light words were strangely out of place.

She turned her large luminous eyes full on him. “What if you have no friends to neglect?” she asked, coldly, stonily, as one might who had long been accustomed to look the fact in the face.

If Lance had been in his usual frame of mind, words would have come trippingly to his tongue at hearing a handsome young woman thus frankly proclaim her friendlessness. That he stood silently gazing at her for a good minute and a half showed that he was undergoing a new

experience. Her head drooped, her hands lay limply in her lap. Seated thus, she gave him the impression of some one half-stunned by some crushing blow, listless and indifferent whether a second would follow.

"I can hardly credit such a thing," he began, hesitatingly.

She did not let him finish his sentence. She rose slowly from her crouching posture. In the dim light her tall figure seemed to elongate itself beyond its real height.

"Look in mid-heaven!" she said, in the same hard, bitter voice as before.

Lance followed the sweep of her hand to where, under the shadow of the Cuddaw Fell, the old Castle dominated the landscape. High in the heavens, directly over the topmost peak of the Fell, a planet shone out with brilliant, metallic lustre among a thousand stars.

Lance, very hazy in astronomical knowledge, would have liked to ask a thousand questions. What planet was it? Had it a bad character among the planets? And so forth.

But she would not allow one. She drew the hood of her cloak over her head, and so closely round her face that naught but her glittering, forlorn eyes showed beneath it.

“Come, let us go back to the house,” she said. “I have seen enough for one night.”

CHAPTER VI.

LANCE, thinking afterwards over his walk back to the Castle in company with Miss Shore, was driven to admit that never before in his life had he spent so silent a quarter of an hour, in solitary company with a handsome young woman.

Lance had something of a reputation for his conversational powers, but now they appeared suddenly and unaccountably to have failed him. Except in the briefest thanks for assistance over stiles or rough pathway, or monosyllabic acquiescence in his remarks about the beauty of the night, he did not hear Miss Shore's voice.

Once or twice, as they walked along the

dim lanes, in and out among the tree-shadows, he found himself looking at her wonderingly, trying to define, not alone her personality, but what special quality it was in that personality which seemed to attract and repulse him at one and the same moment.

In that bewitching, bewildering half-gloom of the summer's night, she looked, in her long, clinging gray garments, scarcely less shadowy than the shadows among which they walked. In the smooth paths of the Castle gardens her steps became slow and gliding, and he fell a little behind in his walk, asking himself if it were a real living woman he was following, or merely a bloodless shadow which would by-and-by disappear into the mist and vapour out of which it had emerged.

Inside the hall-door, they parted with a brief "Good-night."

“ Who was she ? what was she ? whence had she come ? whither was she going ? ” Lance wondered, gazing dreamily after the tall, slight figure as it glided noiselessly up the broad oak staircase.

Lady Judith’s falsetto, in gradual approach from the farther end of the hall, brought him back to commonplace earth once more.

Lady Judith’s voice sounded near and nearer. This habit of speaking as she came along was a peculiarity of hers. She was invariably heard before she was seen.

She had her night-lamp in her hand, and, as usual, a fine flow of words on her lips. Madge had gone to bed with a bad headache, and she herself—well, had been a little startled : as she was sitting alone in the drawing-room something had happened which had set her shivering.

Lance's face said, "Fancy! Aunt Judy shivering!"

"If it had happened to any one else," the lady went on serenely, "I should have said that it was a dream; but you know, Lance, I never by any chance indulge in an after-dinner nap."

"No one would ever dare accuse you of such a thing," said Lance, with a double meaning.

"Quite so. I admit that sometimes—sometimes, though rarely—I close my eyes to rest my head; for, what with my farm and Sir Peter, and one thing and another, my brains do get tired at times. Well, I was sitting, as you left me, in the dark corner of the drawing-room—with my eyes shut, perhaps, I'm not sure—when I seemed to hear a rustling at the further end of the room, and, looking up, I saw a tall, gray figure glide, yes—glide is the word—across

the room from the door to the open window, where it seemed to disappear. Now, wasn't it uncanny ? ”

“ Tall and gray ? ” said Lance. “ Don't you mean little and gray ? And didn't it come back again so soon as it had gone out, and then go out again by another door ? ”

As if to verify the impromptu sketch which Lance had given of him, the study door opened at this moment and Sir Peter came forth.

“ My legs ache with sitting still so long. I've been dictating letters ever since dinner, and yet my table's covered ; and Stubbs is still hard at work ! ” he said, plaintively, as he opened the door which stood opposite the study door, in order that he might have a free line of march.

A sudden thought struck Lance :

“ Uncle Peter, can you give me three

minutes?" he asked, "I want to speak to you."

Sir Peter was delighted.

"I know, I know," he said, rubbing his hands gleefully and shutting the door briskly on Lady Judith's portly figure mounting the staircase. "My dear boy, I know exactly what you're going to tell me. It's about Madge. You've asked her again, and she has said 'Yes,' and you want to be married at once! It would be a capital idea to make one thing of my birthday festivities and your wedding festivities next month, eh? My dear boy, I'm delighted—delighted! A quarter of an hour's talk will settle——"

"I wish to goodness you'd let me talk," interrupted Lance, brusquely. "I haven't asked Madge, and I haven't the slightest intention of doing so—that is, I mean," he added, correcting himself, "I know if I

were to ask her just now I should simply get a 'No' for my pains. Now, will you listen to what I have to say?"

It was evident that he had quite forgotten his pleasant meditation over his leisurely cigar in the earlier part of the evening.

Sir Peter looked towards the corner of the room where Mr. Stubbs sat at a table writing by lamplight, with his back to them. "Is it anything private—strictly private?"

Lance had quite overlooked the secretary. But then he was just the sort of man to be overlooked—one of the kind we may meet every day, and whom we may see a dozen times over, and then come away, and one of us will assert that he's tall, and another that he's short; a third that he's fair, and a fourth that he's dark; while, as a matter of fact, he is most likely

none of these things and could best be described by a series of negations.

“No, not exactly private,” answered Lance, leading the way, however, to the other end of the room, and speaking in a low voice. “But I know you delight in doing a kind action, and I was going to make a suggestion to you.”

Sir Peter was all eager attention at once.

“I hope it covers a wide area,” he said, describing a semicircle in the air with his arms. “I dislike wasting time and strength over microscopic schemes.”

“I don’t think my suggestion can be dignified by the name of ‘scheme,’ microscopic or otherwise,” said Lance. “It’s about Miss Shore.”

Then he hesitated.

Sir Peter was most willing to help him along. “Fine young woman—very,” he ejaculated. “Good figure, well dressed.

Foreign mother, I suppose—must be. Shore is a Sussex name, isn't it?"

"I was thinking," Lance went on, "that it might be kind to ask her to prolong her stay here for a day or two; she seems very desolate and friendless!"

"Eh? what, desolate and friendless?" And Sir Peter's eye wandered to the writing-table, where a locked drawer held his cheque-book. "Did she tell you so? I didn't hear her say so as we came along, and I think I heard all your conversation."

Of necessity he must have done so, seeing that during the drive home he had leaned forward with folded arms on the box-seat, which Lance and Miss Shore occupied, for the express purpose of so doing.

Lance felt discretion was needed. "I can't say that she told me so, but I inferred as much from—from the fact of her travel-

ling alone, and from the very melancholy look on her face. You may have noticed it."

"Ah, yes, now you speak of it I did notice that she had a peculiarly sad expression of countenance. I'm sure I shall be delighted. Ask her to stay as long as she feels inclined."

"The invitation would come better from the ladies of the family," suggested Lance.

"Ah, yes, of course. Well, you ask Lady Judith to invite her to stay on a bit."

"No; you ask Lady Judith," said Lance. "The suggestion would come better from you."

Sir Peter rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Eh? No; I don't think it would. Between you and me, Lance, Lady Judith and I don't hit it off altogether as I could wish sometimes. I don't like to say it, but I don't think she would be at all likely to

give Miss Shore a welcome, if she looked upon her as a possible *protégée* of mine."

Lance began a vigorous demur to this. "Now, Uncle Peter——"

Uncle Peter gave a little jump. "I've got an idea—capital idea! You ask Madge to invite Miss Shore to stay on a day or two, and we'll tell Lady Judith when it's done."

"Ah, capital!" echoed Lance. "You ask Madge, and it's settled at once."

"No, you ask Madge. The suggestion will come better from you, my dear boy."

Lance's face changed. "No, I don't think it would. Between you and me, Uncle Peter, Madge and I don't hit it off altogether as I could wish sometimes. I don't like to say it, but I don't think she would be at all likely to give Miss Shore a welcome if she looked upon her as a possible *protégée* of mine."

"Eh, what! Don't hit it off, you two?"

cried Sir Peter. "Don't believe a word of it. You squabble, do you say? Nonsense; what you call squabbling is coquetry on her part, nothing more. Don't get such an idea as that into your head for a moment. Women are born flirts—born coquettes. I ought to know, I have had twenty-five years' experience of married life."

How far his married life had helped him in his experience of feminine coquetry it would be impossible to say. One might as well at any time have attempted a flirtation with the Marble Arch in Hyde Park, or the old Cuddaw Fell itself, as with Lady Judith.

Lance backed out of the study before this tirade.

He did not notice that Mr. Stubbs, half-turning his head as he sat, watched him out of the room with a curious look in his narrow eyes.

CHAPTER VII.

As a rule, the moral temperature of a household can be more easily taken at the morning than at the evening meal. At the dinner-hour conventionalities are treated with greater respect, and idiosyncrasy is swamped.

Breakfast at the Castle on the morning after Miss Shore's arrival was a typical meal.

Sir Peter ate it walking from room to room.

Lady Judith ate it talking of her farm and her dairy.

Madge ate it reading her letters.

Lance was accustomed to get through breakfast at a fairly brisk pace and then be

off to the stables or kennels. On this particular morning, however, he deviated from his usual custom for he ate next to nothing, and then sat still with his empty plate before him watching the door.

It was an odd, jerky sort of breakfast. Food seemed eaten, as it were, in parentheses. Exercise on Sir Peter's part, conversation on Lady Judith's, letter-reading on Madge's, and anything you please on Lance's part, seemed to be the real object of their assembling at nine o'clock in the morning.

Lady Judith was in high spirits over a new patent incubator which she had just introduced into use at her home farm. She could talk of nothing else, and imagined that every one at table was addressing inquiries to her respecting it—which inquiries she answered appropriately or otherwise, as the case might be.

For instance, when Madge asked how

a new maid, engaged a day or two previously, was doing her work, she got for reply :

“ Works magnificently—in an altogether superior fashion. I shall recommend the thing all over the county.”

And when Lance chanced to make a remark upon the extraordinary heat of the previous day, the lady broke in with :

“ It hatched over ninety chickens yesterday, and no less than one hundred and ten the day before.”

The door of the breakfast-room immediately faced the study on the other side of the hall. Both these doors were set wide open ; and Sir Peter, oscillating like a pendulum between the two rooms, would be one moment eating a morsel of chicken in the one, and the next dictating a line to Mr. Stubbs, already seated in the study at his writing-table.

“ I hardly know which way to turn, my

hands are so full," he said to Madge, literally in passing.

To have heard him speak one might have thought at the very least that he was a Cabinet Minister, with the responsibility on his shoulders of keeping even the balance of power in Europe.

Madge, looking furtively at Lance as she got through her correspondence, seemed to read, "Is she coming?" written on his face. "I sent my maid to call Miss Shore," she said, coldly, answering, as she imagined, his unspoken thoughts. "But she tells me she could get no answer to her knocking; so I suppose the young lady is tired with her long journey."

If she had spoken out all her thoughts she would have added: "Really, I have no interest in the matter beyond the wish that the young lady should save the mid-day train from Lower Upton."

Lance dawdled about the morning and breakfast rooms for half an hour or so, and then disappeared into the gun-room. Sir Peter had eyes and ears only for his correspondence. Lady Judith went trailing through the cornfields, fan in one hand and a big white umbrella in the other, down to her farm.

Madge, feeling that the responsibility of Miss Shore's movements rested on her shoulders, despatched her maid once more with orders to rap louder than ever at the lady's door, and not to come away till she received an assurance that she was heard.

When, however, the maid came back with the same report as before—that, in spite of twenty minutes of rapping at intervals, not a sound was to be heard, Madge made her inhospitable wish give way to a kindlier impulse. It might be as well, she thought, if she herself went up

to the young lady's room, in case illness or some accident had befallen her.

So, accordingly, she made her way to the upper quarters, and delivered a series of raps on the closed door.

All the same, never a sound broke the stillness within.

Then Madge thought it was high time that she turned the handle and ascertained for herself the condition of affairs on the other side of the door.

She made as much noise as she could in entering. There was Miss Shore lying on her bed, dressed in her gray cloth traveling-dress of overnight. Her hat was on the floor beside the bed, as if it had been suddenly tossed off; her gray cloak was flung, as if at random, over the face of the toilette-glass.

But was it at random? This was the question Madge asked herself; for there

was also the cheval glass pushed into a distant corner of the room, with its face turned to the wall.

With an odd feeling of apprehension, Madge approached the bed and looked down into the sleeper's face.

Her head was thrown back on the pillow, leaving the white, slender pillar of a throat bare to view. Her face was dead white; the bandeau of black hair, which fitted the head like a crown, had slanted forward, overlapping the eyebrows; her lips showed scarcely so coral-red as they had in the sunlight on the lawn; her breathing was low and regular, and there was nothing to give Madge the impression that the sleep was an unnatural one.

Nothing except a glass standing on a little table beside the bed, which might — so Madge conjectured — have been hastily drained and set down before the

sleeper had thrown herself back on her pillows.

Madge debated for a moment in her own mind what she should do. Ought she to endeavour to rouse the young lady? Or was she in a condition that required medical aid?

She made the round of the room. She drew up the blind, letting the morning sun fall full on the sleeper's face. It transformed the dull black hair into the glossy black of a raven's wing, marked out line by line every blue vein in all its delicate tracery on cheek and eyelid; but never so much as a fluttering breath showed that the girl was conscious of any disturbing influence.

Then Madge thought it would be as well to take counsel on the matter; so to the gun-room accordingly she went, taking it for granted that she would find Lance there.

He was just coming out of the room as

she reached it. They took a turn or two in the outside gallery while she detailed to him the state of affairs.

Lance looked disturbed and distressed, she thought; but, for all that he treated the matter lightly.

“Depend upon it, she’s worn out with travelling. Didn’t she say that she had had two days of it?” he said. “Don’t you remember once how I slept right off for sixteen hours after a heavy day’s tramp? Leave her to have her sleep out; she’ll wake right enough later on in the day.”

“What about the glass beside the bed?” queried Madge, suspiciously.

“Oh, I shouldn’t think any more of that, if I were you; don’t say a word about it to Sir Peter, or he’ll be sending off for a dozen doctors, and as many nurses. Take my word for it, there’s nothing to fuss over.”

They walked up and down the long gallery for a minute or two in silence.

"What do you think about the looking-glasses being hidden and turned to the wall?" presently Madge asked.

Lance laughed.

"Accident—pure accident. The thing was in her way ; she pushed it in a corner ; she wanted to get rid of her cloak, and by chance threw it over the other. You've made a mountain out of a mole-hill."

"Have I? I'm not so sure of that," answered Madge, slowly. "Being what she is"—here she eyed Lance narrowly—"it is difficult to understand her not wishing to look at herself in the glass. Now, if she were as ugly as I am, the thing could easily enough be understood."

With the first part of her sentence, Lance seemed to be entirely in accord ; the latter part he ignored.

“Yes,” he said, thoughtfully. “As you say, being what she is, it is difficult to understand that she could have the slightest objection to be confronted with her own face in a mirror.”

Then, as if to end a discussion which was distasteful to him, he made a slight excuse, and went back to his guns once more.

Madge, suddenly recollecting that she had on the previous day left her work-basket in a little sitting-room off the gallery, turned the handle of the door, to discover, to her amazement, Mr. Stubbs, just within the room, “not a yard from the key-hole,” as she said to herself indignantly. He was in a standing posture, as if he had retreated before the opening door.

Madge’s face showed her astonishment.

“I came here to find Lady Judith,” he

said, a little hurriedly. "I suppose she is down at the home farm?"

Then, without waiting for a reply, he slipped past her out of the room.

The impression left on Madge's mind was that Mr. Stubbs had been an intentional listener to her conversation with Lance.

CHAPTER VIII.

LADY JUDITH spent nearly the whole of that day at her farm ; the first half in the dairy, inspecting the working of a new butter-making machine ; the second half in the meadows under the trees, among the shorthorns and "black Welsh." The patient, dull-eyed beasts must have thought her a sort of incarnated stormy south-wind as she stood over them, with her big fan, superintending the administration of aconite in soda-water bottles, to those who appeared to be suffering from incipient pleuro-pneumonia.

Sir Peter grew tired of his letter-writing as soon as the morning meal offered him

no excuse for incessant perambulations ; so he ceased dictating, got into the saddle and rode over the hills to see how the new wing of the parish schools, in which he took a great interest, was progressing. Half-way there he suddenly recollected the existence of Miss Shore as a visitor in the house, galloped back at a tremendous pace, set all the bells ringing and every servant he could seize upon running backwards and forwards with inquiries as to where she was, what she had been doing all the morning, and whether she had got over the fatigue of the previous day.

The replies of the servants were necessarily unsatisfactory, and Sir Peter, catching a glimpse of a pink skirt among the laurels in a shady nook, had Madge suggested to his mind as a more likely source of information.

Madge was stitching in leisurely fashion

at a group of yellow marguerites on a brown plush ground. Lance, in gray tweed suit, was leaning over the back of her chair with Roy, a great tawny mastiff, stretched on the ground at his feet with his nose on his master's boot.

Madge had been a little startled to hear Lance's voice over her shoulder, suddenly asking the somewhat eccentric question :

"Madge, if you had had the choice given you, what planet would you have chosen to be born under?"

"Planet—planet!" echoed Madge. "Oh, what planet is supposed to give women beauty and powers of fascination? It must be Venus. Under Venus, of course."

"Yes, it must be Venus," decided Lance. "Well, what are the other planets supposed to do or to give? And what's the name of the one that shows now every night over the Cuddaw Fell?"

Madge laughed outright. "Are you going in for astrology or astronomy—which? Upon my word, I haven't the remotest notion what planets are in the ascendant—is that the phrase?—at the present moment."

"Madge," said Sir Peter's voice just then, a little jerkily from want of breath, "can you tell me where Miss Shore is, and whether she is feeling rested, and if she would like letters or telegrams sent away to her friends up in the North or down in the South, wherever they are?"

"She was sound asleep when I came out of the house. I haven't the least idea what her wishes or plans are," answered Madge.

"Asleep! asleep! At this time of day? Impossible! My dear, she must be ill. We'd better send some one to fetch Broughton——"

“Oh, let her alone, Uncle Peter,” interposed Lance. “The poor girl’s evidently tired out with a long journey. I dare say she’ll wake up right enough a little later on, and tell us what she wants to do or have done.”

Lance’s words were verified.

Madge’s maid, sent up about tea-time, came down saying that Miss Shore had answered her rapping with the intimation that she would come downstairs in the cool of the evening, and the request that yesterday’s newspaper might be brought to her.

“Yesterday’s newspaper!” repeated Madge. “You had better go to Mr. Stubbs for that; he’ll be more likely to have taken possession of one than any one else in the house.”

Then, in her own mind, she indulged in free comment on the extraordinary fashion

in which this young lady—an utter stranger to them all—had seen fit to conduct herself since she had come into the house. No apology had she offered for her inattention to household hours ; no request had she made for means to continue her journey.

“ Really,” Madge decided, “ her beauty may be a matter of dispute ; but, as to her breeding, there can be but one opinion.”

Madge was not disposed to modify her opinion at any rate, when, later on in the day, as she pinned a bouquet of crimson roses in her dress preparatory to descending to dinner, she caught a glimpse through her muslin window-blind of a picture—a garden idyll it might have been called—which made her flush scarlet, though not with pleasure.

Such a pretty picture, too ! A young

lady, in pale gray robes, leaning back in a wicker garden-chair ; a young man, hat in hand, in the act of presenting her with some flowers.

Madge stood for three minutes watching them. Evidently the lady declined the flowers, for the young man tossed them on one side with a disappointed air.

“ Would she like any others ? ” Madge could fancy he asked, for the young lady shook her head, with a slight movement of her hand as if flowers were distasteful to her.

Then the dinner-bell clanged, and the two turned their faces towards the house.

In the summer it was the custom of Sir Peter and his family to dine in the large inner hall of the Castle, instead of in the dining-room. This hall was palatial in its dimensions, oak-panelled and oak-ceiled. It was hung on one side with ancestral

portraits; on the other, Gothic windows looked out into the garden. A wide mantelpiece divided the ancestral portraits right and left. Over this mantelpiece was a long, low mirror, which reflected the pretty picture of waving trees and summer sky that the Gothic windows framed.

As Madge entered by one door, she could hear the footsteps of Lance and Miss Shore crossing the vestibule to enter by another. Lance's voice, too, caught her quick ear in a remark as to the gloominess of the house compared with the outside summer brightness. She heard the words:

“Dismal old hall! Talk about eighteen centuries looking down upon you, it's nothing to compare with eight-and-twenty Critchetts looking down on you as you eat your food.”

The last word brought him and his companion into the room.

Lady Judith was on the point of taking her seat at table. She was not in the best of tempers. Sir Peter, overhearing Lance's talk, chanced to remark that, "however gloomy the hall might be, it was nevertheless a pleasant refuge from midday sun—the coolest room in the house, in fact." Lady Judith catching the word "refuge," and nothing more, not unnaturally concluded that another scheme of charity was in progress of development, and immediately became voluble and prophetic on the matter.

With a formal bow she waved Miss Shore to her seat at table. "Refuges, indeed! As if there were not enough and to spare throughout the kingdom!" she declaimed. "Two at Carstairs to my certain knowledge, and a good workhouse with accommodation for fifty men and as

many women within three miles outside the town." And again she waved Miss Shore to her seat.

But Miss Shore did not take it. She stood motionless, her head turned from the table, her hand resting on the back of her chair. Madge could see that this was a necessity to her, for she trembled so violently that she needed to support herself with extraneous aid.

"I cannot eat to-night," she said, turning a white face towards Sir Peter. "I will go up to my room."

Madge flashed a glance first to Lance, then to the looking-glass opposite which Miss Shore's chair had been placed.

"Can you eat seated on this side of the table?" she asked, rising and offering her own place.

Miss Shore, with a brief word of thanks, accepted Madge's chair.

“She is ashamed to look herself in the face for some reason or other,” was Madge’s uncharitable mental comment on the little episode.

CHAPTER IX.

NATURE is a strict economist in her work, she does not squander her resources. She gives to the "viewless winds" and invisible thunders the blasts of trumpets and crash of artillery; but when she paints the "awful rose of dawn," or the golden glories of sunset, heaven's echoes are mute, and without so much as a muffled whisper, the great cloud pageant issues forth, troops across the sky, and vanishes.

Madge never saw the sun sink behind the Cuddaws, without some such thought as this in her mind.

As she stood on the terrace that evening after dinner, watching the stormily-splendid

clouds that, gathering low on the horizon, were slowly quenching the limpid tints of the after-glow, it seemed to her that those sumptuous reds and purples should have come with the crackle of field-pieces and the roar of battle ; and that those tender, translucent greens and yellows should have died into the gray with the sounds of softly retreating harps and viols.

Dinner had been a short meal that night, and would have been shorter still could the wishes of three, out of the five seated at table, have been consulted. Miss Shore ate next to nothing, spoke never a word unless pointedly addressed, and then her replies were all but monosyllabic. Lady Judith eyed her keenly at intervals during the long discourse for which the word "refuge" served as text. Sir Peter eyed her benevolently, asked after her health, didn't wait for an answer ; asked if she

would like telegram or letter sent to her friends anywhere to assure them of her safety, didn't wait for an answer to that, but hoped that she wouldn't feel herself bound to continue her journey on the following day unless she felt disposed so to do.

To all this, Miss Shore replied with a manifest effort: "Let me stay one day more. I won't ask for another—one day more, only that."

The request was put in eccentric fashion, even conceding to the speaker a certain indulgence for her unfamiliarity with the English tongue. This was scarcely the way in which an unexpected guest might be supposed to crave permission to extend a stay in a hospitable house. A criminal at a bar of justice, pleading that his sentence might be deferred for another twenty-four hours, might have done so

in much such a voice, with much such a look on his face as Miss Shore had on hers.

Even Sir Peter became dimly conscious that his kindly commonplaces had somehow touched a deep chord, for he stumbled and stammered over his courteous consent to her request.

As for Madge, looking up she caught Lance's eye fixed on Miss Shore's white face with so intensely interested a look in it that the words of kindly courtesy she was about to utter died unspoken on her lips.

It was the recollection of that look which sent her out by herself on to the terrace, to watch the sunset glories instead of the less fascinating spectacle of Lady Judith fanning herself to sleep in her arm-chair.

As for Miss Shore, no sooner had the

meal come to an end than she went straight up the stairs to her own room once more.

Presently Lance joined Madge on the terrace.

"There's a storm brewing overhead," he said, by way of beginning conversation.

"Is there?" answered Madge, by way of ending it; for the cloud of undefined annoyance caused by Lance's irrational sympathy for an utter stranger had scarcely passed away.

But, nevertheless, they might soon have drifted into cheerful talk if Sir Peter's short, quick footsteps had not at that moment been heard, followed at an interval by his blithe, cricket-like voice.

"Don't let me disturb you, young people," he chirruped. "This is the time for saying sweet things—blushes are not so conspicuous, eh, Madge?"

"So far," said Madge, sententiously,

“we’ve said nothing, beyond a remark as to the possibility of a storm coming on.”

“Eh, nothing! Why, Lance, you sly fellow, what has become of all those grand speeches you were so busy concocting at dinner-time, that you hadn’t a word to say to anybody?”

“Madge knows all the sweet things I think of her; there is no need for me to say them,” answered Lance, in light, complimentary fashion.

“Ah, yes—yes. Very neatly put, ’pon my word. Now, Madge, you must say something equally sweet by way of acknowledgment.”

“Lance knows exactly what I think of the sweet things he thinks of me; there is no need for me to say it,” answered Madge, solemnly, and not in complimentary fashion.

And her thought, as she said this, was :

"If he would but let us alone! If an attack of gout would but keep him prisoner for a week, everything might come right."

But Sir Peter's persistently optimistic view of the "situation" showed that gout was yet a long way off.

"Ah! that's right, that's right," he said, more blithely than ever. "Where young people so thoroughly understand each other as Lance and you do, long-winded speeches are unnecessary."

And he tripped away lightly once more, no doubt with the sound of wedding-bells in his ears.

"He'll come back again in another minute," said Lance, looking over his shoulder after Sir Peter's retreating figure. "Come for a row, Madge; there's something I particularly want to say to you to-night."

But, though Madge acquiesced, and, fetching a light shawl, was ready in a moment, Lance evidently found his something hard to say, for they wound along the garden paths in an almost unbroken silence.

The heat seemed to increase upon them as they descended the slope under the overarching boughs. Flower-scents hung heavily in the air. The whirring of gnats and flies was almost intolerable.

Lance, with a visible effort, made a remark which seemed to be suggested by nothing and to lead nowhere. It was :

“Madge, do you know you’ve a fine reputation for benevolence and Christian charity? I had no idea till the other day, when I was dining at the Brabazons’, what a lot people think of you.”

It scarcely seemed possible that Madge could know by intuition whither Lance’s

remark was intended to lead, yet she answered coldly :

“ Really, I don’t care two straws what people think of me. Please talk about something interesting.” She laid marked emphasis on the word “ people.” “ If he has anything nice to say to me, he may as well say it on his own account,” was her supplementary thought.

Lance read that thought easily enough, and the desire to tease her immediately became irresistible.

“ Oh, of course not ; why should you care even one straw ? ‘ People ’ say pleasant things of you one minute, and disagreeable things the next. That’s the way of the world.”

“ They have no right to say disagreeable things,” she answered, sharply. “ Not that it matters much—I never listen to gossip, and don’t wish to know what any one

says of me, whether agreeable or disagreeable."

"Of course not. . Envy is at the root of nine out of every ten of the spiteful things women say of each other."

"Women! What women have been running me down?"

"Don't get excited, Madge. It's a tribute to one's breeding to be disparaged by the crowd."

"Disparaged! Who has been disparaging me? Lance, I insist on knowing what was said of me at the Brabazons' the other night!"

Lance laughed outright.

"Ah, now we've got back to the point where we diverged. I was going to tell you what was said of you at the Brabazons' the other night, and you wouldn't listen—here we are at the edge of the stream. Well, Lottie Brabazon said that you were

the Lady Bountiful of the county, and put every one else to shame with your generosity to the poor."

With his last word Lance stooped to unmoor the boat.

Here the larches gave place to willows and osiers, and the expanse of running water somewhat cooled the hot air. The clouds hung ominously low, however, with more of black than purple in them now.

This miniature river was formed by the conjunction of two little streams which had been diverted from their course to add to the beauty of the Castle pleasure-grounds, by dividing the flower-garden from the park. It made a pretty little bit of landscape, with its fringe of bulrushes and water-flags on one side, and plantation of aspens and willows on the other.

As Madge stepped into the boat, a

sleepy swan sailed majestically from out the shadowy reeds. It headed the boat for a few minutes, showing snow-white against the dark shadows thrown on the water by the inky clouds overhead; then it disappeared into the dimness beyond.

Madge's good-humour came back to her.

"This is heavenly!" she said, taking off her bracelet and paddling with her hand in the cool stream. "I dare say we shall get a good fifteen minutes out here before the storm breaks."

Lance shook his head.

"Ten only," he said, reading the sky with an eye practised in cloud and mountain presages. "Madge, don't let's squabble for five, at least, out of those ten minutes; there is something I particularly wish to say to you."

He had grown suddenly serious.

Madge grew serious also.

"It's about Miss Shore?" she said, questioning and affirming in a breath.

"Yes; about Miss Shore," he answered, quietly. "Madge, do you know she is very friendless, very desolate, and, I should imagine, only partially recovered from some heavy sorrow."

"She has taken you into her confidence?"

"To a very limited extent," laughed Lance; but his laugh was a little uneasy. "Just before dinner this evening I came upon her in the garden. We talked—no, I suppose I did the greater part of the talking—but, at any rate, somehow or other I elicited the fact that she is homeless and friendless, and it doesn't require a very vigorous stretch of imagination to conclude from those facts that she is moneyless also."

Lance's, "Somehow or other I elicited the fact," can scarcely be said to be a true statement of what had taken place between him and Miss Shore, in that brief five minutes before dinner of which Madge's prejudiced eyes had conveyed so distorted an impression to her brain.

He had found the young lady in the garden, leaning back in her chair with white, inanimate face, like that of one newly recovered from a swoon. The flowers he held in his hand to present to her he had at once tossed on one side, as incongruous with the look of suffering her face wore.

"You are ill," he had said with real concern. "Let me send word to your friends."

"You must find them before you can send to them," had been her brief reply.

Then she had waved him on one side

with the impetuous request that he would let her alone — not persecute her with questions.

“I thought she was travelling to friends up in the North when the train broke down. You said so; Sir Peter said so—some one said so, at any rate,” said Madge, presently.

“Did some one? I’m not sure. Well, at any rate, from what I got out of her this afternoon it seems as if she hadn’t a friend in the world, and, what is more, she appears perfectly callous on the matter, as if the fact were of no importance whatever.”

“And you want me to take a vast interest in a matter on which the person most concerned is callous!” exclaimed Madge.

“Well, yes; why not? A man jumps into the water and tries to drown himself,

and sometimes he is more than callous on the matter—has, in fact, a very strong objection to being pulled out again; but, for all that, we do our best to save him.”

Madge made no reply.

She was a woman of strong prejudices, and those she had conceived against Miss Shore at first sight were stubborn ones; nevertheless, she had been so accustomed all her life long to yield compliance to Lance's wishes, that it was almost easier for her to let go those prejudices than to deny him now.

Lance's manner did not exhibit the uneasiness he had expressed to Sir Peter over-night, respecting Madge's possible reception of a petition from him on Miss Shore's behalf.

He went on composedly as if denial were out of the question.

“I've no doubt I went to work this

afternoon in a very bungling fashion—I'm not a particularly good hand at getting people's confidence when they've no mind to give it, and she was very loth to speak of herself—but I dare say, Madge, if you were to interest yourself and have a talk with her——”

There came at this moment a flutter and a rustling from among the reeds and osiers at the water's edge.

“What's that?” queried Madge, sharply, turning her head towards the sound.

Lance's look followed hers.

“An otter, I dare say,” he answered, quietly. But, nevertheless, he kept a steady eye on the spot whence the sound had come.

Madge dealt a sharp, though not a final, blow to her prejudices.

“Yes, I'll try and get a talk with her to-morrow, 'and find out if we can help

her," she answered slowly. "It's rather difficult to offer people money right out—but perhaps she may be clever at singing, or painting, and may be able to give me a few lessons. At any rate, I'll promise to do what I can." Then she changed the subject abruptly, exclaiming: "How dark it's getting! Hadn't we better think of turning back?" In good truth, she had had enough of Miss Shore and her friendless condition.

Bird-notes had ceased now; only a distant sound of whirring insect life broke the stillness.

Lance looked up at the sky. "We must get back at once, or the storm will be on top of us," he answered. As he finished speaking, there came the low growl of advancing thunder.

Lance plied a swift oar. As they shot past the shadowy nook, whence the rust-

ling sound had come, he peered in curiously among the reeds. The flags waved ; the osiers bent and whispered ; but it was only the wind rising now.

CHAPTER X.

THE storm was a dry one ; it broke in its full fury almost immediately after Madge and Lance got back to the house. They had scampered up the steep garden paths as if pursued by the storm-fiend himself, and Madge had to stand a good three minutes just within the hall-door to get her breath back.

“Get away from the trees, Madge,” he had said, catching her arm and pulling her along at a fine pace.

Well, she could easily understand his anxiety to get her and himself under shelter from the storm. What she could not understand was his haste to rush out

into it again. It is true he shouted to her as he disappeared in the outside darkness: "I've forgotten something, I shall be back in a minute." But that something ought to have been of first importance to necessitate such a headlong rush into what threatened to be one of the worst tempests the country-side had known for years.

Lance's seemingly eccentric conduct, however, admitted of an easy explanation. When he had peered among the reeds and water-flags as his boat shot past, he had thought he saw the flutter of a gray skirt, whose wearer it was easy to identify.

Madge had read easily enough the forlornness which Miss Shore's white face and stony manner expressed. Lance had read the forlornness, and something else beside. A mood half-desperate, half-defiant, which might possibly find for

itself a desperate means of ending a hopeless life.

It was this thought flashing into his mind as he reached the hall-door, that speeded his feet through the storm to the water's edge once more.

But when he got down there among the sedges and willows, not a soul was to be seen. A startled bird flew from out a marshy hollow with a sharp cry ; a solitary frog croaked a dismal note of warning ; an ominous breeze, rippling the dark surface of the water, set the reeds bending and whispering together. Other sound there was none.

Something glittering at the bottom of the little boat they had just quitted caught his eye. Picking it up he saw that it was the bracelet which Madge had unclasped as she had paddled in the stream.

A brilliant flash of lightning cleft the

inky clouds over his head, and for one brief moment the whole night-hidden landscape stood revealed.

Old Cuddaw crowned it, standing out bold, bleak, and bare against the leaden sky. Below, the Castle showed a gray solid block of masonry with every turret and gable sharply defined. Lower still the valley lay, a dim expanse of waving, shadowy trees, out of which crept a white, stony path, leading with many a wind up to the Fells.

It seemed less like one grand expanse of scenery thus laid bare to view than a combination of two landscapes, the one belonging to the sky, the other to the earth beneath.

In that brief, vivid illumination, Lance saw something else beside the sky picture and the dim valley with its upward-winding path—the figure of a woman in long flowing cloak in that path,

making her way rapidly towards the mountains.

It did not need a second flash of lightning to tell him who that woman was. But what her motive could be in thus daring the storm on those mountain heights was not so easy to discover.

He thought with dismay of the slippery mountain paths, the shelving ledges, the holes, and gaping precipices. He who had known them from boyhood would yet have hesitated to dare their dangers on a moonless night. And there was she—a woman, a stranger, without guide or light—making for them with straight and rapid steps, that implied purpose and design.

His course was clear to him. A shorter way led out of the valley than the one she was following; it intersected the former path at the point where the mountain

ascent began. By using his utmost despatch he might intercept her at that point, and succeed in inducing her to take shelter in a sandy hollow beneath the over-arching rocks, which, in his boyish days, had been a favourite play - place for him — his “Crusoe’s cave.”

It was not possible to make swift headway through the woody moorland which lay between him and this haven of refuge. The darkness was increasing with every step he took. Overhead the thunder crashed with a bewildering rapidity, every peal prolonged to twice its length by the mountain echoes, till from east to west, from west to east, the heavens seemed one vast plain of rolling artillery.

He hailed the bright, scintillating lightnings as he would have hailed a friendly lantern. They showed him the briar and

tangle in his path, the big stumbling-blocks of boulders, the pitfalls of disused gravel-pits. They showed him also, when at length he reached the "Crusoe's cave," Miss Shore's slender figure standing about thirty feet above his head on the overlapping ledge.

Whatever she was or was not, one thing was certain: she must be a practised mountaineer, or she could never have reached even this moderate height in safety.

"How much higher is she going?" thought Lance. Then, making one vigorous effort in the pauses of the thunder, he shouted to her at the top of his voice, calling her by name, entreating her to wait for him, so that he might take her to a place of safety.

There came an awful flash of lightning at this moment, which seemed to spend its

fiercest strength on the very ledge of rock on which she stood.

Lance, half-blinded, looking upwards, saw the girl standing motionless, while the lightning seemed literally to smite the ground at her very feet. Then came the terrific, resonant thunder, then the inky, bewildering darkness closed in upon the mountain-side once more.

Half-stunned, as well as half-blinded, Lance made his way up the stony path which lay between him and Miss Shore; his heart, stout as it was, quailing at the thought of the sight that might greet his eyes as the dire result of Nature's cruelly-expanded forces.

But no sight more dire than that of Miss Shore leaning against the bulging side of the rock met his view as he rounded the path. She might have been carved out of the rock itself for the motionlessness and

rigidity of her outline. The hood of her gray cloak had fallen from her head; her bandeau of black hair had uncoiled, and hung in a long black line on one side of her ashen-white face; her eyes were round and staring.

She did not turn her head at his approach, merely pointed to the ground at her feet, where the quick thunderbolt had literally split the rock and "kissed its burial."

"Did you see that?" she asked, under her breath, in an awe-stricken voice.

"See it!" cried Lance. "Who could help seeing it? Thank Heaven you are safe—don't waste a moment, take my hand, I'll get you down into a place of safety."

But the girl did not stir. "Would that have killed any one else?" she asked, in the same slow, suppressed voice as before.

"Why, of course not, or else it must have killed you," answered Lance, trying

to laugh off what seemed to him a stupefying terror on her part. "You see I wasn't far behind you, and I wasn't hurt. Come, make haste into shelter; we don't know what the next flash may do."

His last words were lost in the crash of another peal.

But it was farther off now. The storm had evidently spent the worst of its fury. The dense sky parted; light clouds went travelling across it, carried by the upper current.

Still the girl did not stir.

"By poison or fire or flood it must be—there is no other way," she muttered under her breath, with eyes not looking at Lance, but beyond him.

"Poison, fire, flood!" All in a moment there seemed to be revealed to Lance a terrible reason for the emptied glass beside the bed, for the crouching figure among

the water-reeds, for the bare-headed defiance of the lightning on the mountain.

Debonair and light-hearted to the last degree, it cost him an effort to shut his eyes to the horror of the whole thing, and to say in an easy, commonplace voice : " Never mind about that ; the thing is now to get into a place of safety. Come."

She looked at him steadily for a moment. " Yes, I will come," she said, slowly. " Fate is stronger than I."

She did not take his hand ; she walked slowly beside him with head bent, and eyes fixed on the ground.

There was no need to seek the refuge of the " Crusoe's cave." Overhead, the light clouds parting showed a faint rift of light from a young moon ; far away in the distance the thunder was dying hard in a succession of low, sonorous growls.

But few words passed between them on

their way back. Lance thanked Heaven when they stood within the Castle grounds once more. Miss Shore seemed tired, dazed ; her voice was weak, her footsteps dragged.

Lights were more conspicuous in the upper than in the lower rooms as they approached the house. One long French window of the library, left unshuttered and unbarred, gave them easy and unnoticed entrance.

“She ought to be locked in her room at night,” thought Lance, as he said his good-night to his companion at the foot of the stairs.

“Oh, Lance,” said Madge, coming out of the drawing-room a moment after, “where have you been ? How white you look ! We were just talking about sending out a party of men with torches and umbrellas in search of you.”

Lance tossed her bracelet to her. "A golden reason for risking a wetting," he said, laughingly, and then vanished forthwith, before she had time to frame a second question.

CHAPTER XI.

MADGE, bent on keeping down the growth of her prejudices, did not forget her promise to Lance, and the morning after the storm saw her seated in Miss Shore's room doing her best to win that young lady's confidence, with the benevolent hope of finding a pretext for inducing her to prolong her stay at the Castle.

It was up-hill work, however. Miss Shore seemed bent on playing the part of a fertilising shower to Madge's prejudices, for rebuff after rebuff did she deal to her kindly overtures.

Miss Shore had not made her appearance at the breakfast-table on the morning

after the storm. Her breakfast had been taken to her in her own room, together with the morning's paper, for which she had once more sent down a special request.

"You are interested in politics—in the foreign news?" asked Madge, by way of making a beginning, and noting that Miss Shore had folded the paper with the Continental news uppermost.

She started.

"I care for foreign news! Why should I? It is nothing to me," she answered, almost fiercely.

Madge felt that she had somehow made a wrong start.

"One naturally likes to have news of one's own country when away from it," she said, apologetically.

"Country!" cried Miss Shore, flushing scarlet, "this is my country; I have no other."

Madge felt bewildered.

"But—but," she stammered, "you are not English, surely. Are you not Italian? You gave me the impression of being Italian."

"I am not Italian; I am English. My father was English; I am English. Hear how I speak!"

Evidently she was ignorant how markedly foreign her accent was.

"I am sorry," said Madge, frankly. "I was hoping that you might be Italian, and that—that we might have studied the language together. I am so wishing to be a fluent linguist."

She did not like to say: "I was hoping that you would be able to give me some lessons in Italian, for which I might have paid you a guinea an hour." She could only hope that her meaning would gradually dawn on her languid listener.

The meaning, however, did not seem to dawn, so Madge went on again :

“I am wanting to improve myself in all sorts of ways. I sometimes feel I am very much behind other people in accomplishments. I want to get some good teaching in singing—I am particularly fond of singing. Do you sing?”

“I do not.”

“Dear me, this is unpromising,” thought Madge. “There’s one thing she couldn’t give me lessons in—courtesy. What shall I try next? Ah!—Perhaps you play on the piano or on the violin?”

“I do not know a note of music.”

“Really?”

There came a long pause.

Miss Shore folded her newspaper with the advertisements outside, but still kept it tightly in her hand.

Madge looked out of the window. The

storm of overnight had disturbed the weather; the air was full of a vapoury heaviness through which the mountains showed black against a leaden sky.

Those mountains suggested an idea:

"I do so wish I had devoted more time to art before I married! I would give anything if I could paint those mountains—that sky. Of course you can paint?"

"I can."

Madge's spirits went up.

"How I envy you——" she began, but then stopped.

She did not care, with other interests growing upon her, to volunteer for a long course of painting lessons; that would mean at least three hours daily in Miss Shore's company. As well reside in "thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice," as that.

Another idea suggested itself.

"I don't mean flower-painting or portrait-painting; I mean can you sketch scenery — mountains, and lakes, and valleys?"

"I hate the mountains," said with slow, suppressed bitterness.

"Hate the mountains! Well, even if you hate them, it needn't prevent your being able to paint them," said Madge, beginning to lose patience a little.

"I can paint them. I have painted mountains grander than these." She broke off a moment, then added, as if she were compelling herself to a course that was advisable rather than attractive: "Do you wish me to paint these mountains for you?"

"That's it — the very thing," cried Madge, drawing a long breath of relief. "I have been wanting, for a long time, to decorate a little room downstairs which I

occupy sometimes with a set of water-colour sketches." (This was a fib, but Madge was at her wits' ends.) "It was my boudoir before I married, and now Sir Peter is good enough to have it refurnished for me. If I could get six or eight pictures of Cumberland scenery hung round it, I should feel it decorated at once."

"Six or eight! There," thought Madge, "she can take just as long as ever she likes over them, and I'll pay her whatever she asks me for them. And if Lance isn't satisfied with my morning's work, I don't know what will please him."

"I will paint them if you wish it," said Miss Shore, and then she looked at the door as if she had endured Madge's company long enough.

Madge rose instantly.

"Is your room comfortable? Have you all you want here?" she asked, looking

round as she so often did when welcoming Lady Judith's guests to the Castle.

Both looking-glasses were pushed into a corner now, both turned face to the wall.

Miss Shore followed Madge's gaze towards that corner.

"They were in my way. I pushed them there," she said, coldly, in a tone that prevented further questioning.

Madge felt that she had earned the thanks which Lance accorded to her, when, later on in the day, she contrived to inform him of her plan to put a little money into Miss Shore's purse.

"I must admit that she is not a taking young woman," she said. "I never felt myself so chilled and repressed in my life before."

The seriousness Lance put into his answer startled her.

"Madge, I do believe," he said, "that

that poor girl has had some terrible experience. I never before in my life saw human eyes with such a hunted, desolate look in them."

"It's wonderful," said Sir Peter, coming into the room at that moment, "how much one can get through between sunrise and sundown, if one only sets to work with a will!"

"Wonderful!" echoed Lance, his seriousness gone in a moment, like a ghost at the cock's crow, and getting up and opening a door on the opposite side of the room, in order that Sir Peter might have free egress whenever he felt so disposed.

Sir Peter had been in a particularly lively frame of mind during the past few days, and Mr. Stubbs had had rather a busy time of it, owing to his patron's wish to re-model every one of the charities on whose committee-list his name figured.

The letter-bag had gone out stuffed every night, yet Sir Peter's brain appeared to be brimming over with ideas.

"I have a splendid scheme on hand just now," he said, thoroughly content now that he had succeeded in breaking the thread of Lance's and Madge's talk, and had concentrated their attention entirely on himself. "A splendid scheme! A little vast—a little vague at present, perhaps."

"Ah," echoed Lance again; "a little vast, a little vague!"

"But what of that? In my schemes I must be vast, or I am nothing. The fault of one-half the schemes of charity submitted to me is that they are microscopic. I say to Stubbs every morning of my life, 'Double, treble, quadruple the proportions of that project, then I will look at it.' But I must have elbow-room—

elbow-room in all I undertake." Here he lifted his elbows in the air with an upward, wing-like motion.

"Ah, elbow-room, of course," said Lance, also executing the wing-like movement with his elbows.

Sir Peter made one turn round the room, and came back again.

"The truth of it is," he said, lowering his voice, and looking over his shoulder, "if it were not for Lady Judith I should by this time have won for myself the reputation of an universal——"

"Provider?" suggested Lance.

"Benefactor," finished the old gentleman, not understanding the allusion. "But, as it is"—here a deep-drawn sigh—"when I would soar on wings like a bird," here he again executed the upward, wing-like movement, "Lady Judith brings me down to earth again, and I feel myself

nothing more than a kite with a string attached to it."

Then he pulled out his watch.

"What, half-past twelve is it? And I have had no exercise to-day. Ah! I must be off for a little stretch in the Park."

"There is a case of foot-and-mouth disease at Lower Upton," said Lady Judith, entering the room by the door by which Sir Peter was about to quit it.

She was fanning herself vigorously. Sir Peter backed into the room before her. Her robust handling of her fan might have conveyed the impression that she had fanned him back again over the threshold.

Now that the husband and wife were together in the room, Madge thought it would be a splendid opportunity to get their combined sanction to the little plan she had just been detailing to Lance respecting Miss Shore.

She accordingly, in a key sufficiently high to reach Lady Judith's ear, asked Sir Peter's consent to it.

Sir Peter's face grew rosy with pleasure.

"The very thing! the very thing!" he cried, rubbing his hands gleefully. "I told you, Lance, if Madge were only consulted on the matter, she'd arrange it all easily enough! And you said——"

"No, I didn't," said Lance, apprehensive of what was coming, and not at all pleased that Madge should know that he and Sir Peter had beforehand taken counsel together on the matter.

"Well, I said I have a hundred plans for——"

"Ah! I dare say you said that," interrupted Lance, bent on preventing further disclosures.

Lady Judith unintentionally became his ally.

"Is she to be a permanence in the house? That's what I want to know," she asked in her highest key, her fan once more with its backward motion stirring the air as much for Sir Peter as for herself. "And am I expected to take her in hand, and be a sort of Providence to her?"

Sir Peter slipped behind her, retreating backwards towards the door.

"No, no, my dear, nothing of the sort; don't trouble yourself. Madge will take all responsibility on her own shoulders, I'm sure."

Lady Judith turned on him, executing the double action with her fan once more.

She caught the word responsibility only.

"Yes, it is a responsibility; and I admit that, if I am to have responsibilities, I would sooner they should be of my own choosing. There was the last gardener's boy you sent

home—wretched little being! He had lost a thumb, and was horribly bow-legged, and I remember you said to me: ‘Nice little fellow! Can’t you put him into page’s livery, and make something of him?’”

“My dear, I have no wish for you to put Miss Shore into page’s livery, I assure you,” said Sir Peter, making a feeble effort to render the situation comic, but getting at the same time a step or two nearer the door.

Lady Judith fanned him on another step or two.

“And the last stable-boy you brought home from London had such a diabolical squint, that he could only see the time by turning his back on the clock and getting a glimpse at it over the top of his ear. Yet you said to me: ‘First-rate lad that! find him something to do at the farm!’”

But she had fairly fanned Sir Peter on

to the door-mat now, and had to appeal to Lance and Madge as audience.

They, however, through long practice, were able to continue undisturbed their own subjects of conversation under the immediate fire of her oratory.

CHAPTER XII.

MADGE, in a moment of exasperation, had wished that gout would seize Sir Peter and hold him prisoner for a week, while she and Lance arranged their affairs to their own liking. Gout, however, was far too elderly and dignified a complaint to attack one of his essentially juvenile temperament.

A single case of measles occurred to a six-months' old baby in a hamlet about fifteen miles distant. It seemed a perfectly natural dispensation of Providence that Sir Peter should be the second victim.

"Don't know what's the matter with me, Lance," he said pitifully, "I feel as if my legs didn't belong to me."

"Perhaps you've tired them a bit," said Lance, suggesting a far-away possibility.

"I would sooner have it myself twenty times over," said the worthy medical practitioner who was called in ; "how on earth we're to keep him in one room without a lock or key is more than I can think."

When by dint of combined effort they succeeded in getting Sir Peter to bed, they could have fancied that his pillow was stuffed with steel springs which sent his head up with a jerk as soon as it was laid upon it, so perpetually were his eyes and ears on the alert for all that went on around him.

His correspondence was a great anxiety to him.

"You'll see to my letters, Lance, won't you?" he begged, "and"—this added in a timorous whisper — "you'll keep my study-door locked and the key in your pocket, won't you?"

“Oh, you mean lock Stubbs in, and not let him out till the letters are all answered,” queried Lance.

“No, no, no.” Here the whisper grew more confidential still. “I mean keep Lady Judith out, in case—in case she might—you know—you know.”

“Oh yes, I know,” answered Lance, reassuringly. “I’ll look after your letters, never fear, Uncle Peter, and keep down the correspondence right enough.”

Lance’s idea of “keeping down the correspondence” was simple and effective. He evaded Sir Peter’s order to lock the study-door by never going near it at all.

“Bring the letters and pen and ink into the gun-room, Stubbs,” he said; “while I overhaul my fishing-tackle, you can read them out to me, and I’ll do a Sir Peter and dictate replies.”

To the gun-room the letters were

accordingly taken, and Lance, with a cigarette between his teeth and his fishing gear in his hand, quickly disposed of Sir Peter's correspondence.

Mr. Stubbs read the first letter, and then waited in silence for a reply to be forthcoming.

"Go on," said Lance. "We'll read them off half-a-dozen at a time, and then I dare say one answer will do for the lot."

The first half-dozen consisted mainly of appeals for advice on matters concerning the internal working of certain charities of which Sir Peter was president.

"Toss all that lot into the waste-paper basket," said Lance. "They'll answer themselves if they're let alone. If they don't get any advice from Sir Peter, they'll conclude they'll have to do without it. Now we'll go on to the next half-dozen."

They chanced to be appeals for help from various benevolent institutions.

"Ten pounds to each all round for that lot, Stubbs, and tell them not to bother again," said the young man. "And that'll do for this morning—the rest will keep till to-morrow; I'm off to the stables now."

If he had known what letter lay unread in the packet which Mr. Stubbs proceeded to lock up in Sir Peter's secretaire, he would scarcely have decreed in such light-hearted fashion that "the rest would keep" till the morrow.

He detailed to Madge, later on in the day, the easy, comfortable manner in which he had got through his morning's work.

"The truth of it is, Madge," he said, "half the world fret themselves to fiddle-strings over nothing at all! Rest on your oars and let the wind carry you along whenever you've a chance, that's what I say."

Madge, drawing conclusions from a contrasting experience, was disposed to contest the matter with him. "What if the wind carries you the wrong way?" she asked.

"Oh, then try your muscles and have a tussle for it," said Lance, half-way up the stairs to Sir Peter's room, in order to explain to him his patent method of disposing of troublesome correspondence.

"Don't, don't," cried Madge, guessing his intention, and following him at express speed. "It will send him into a fever and give him a bad night."

"It'll make him sleep like a top," persisted Lance, and forthwith, much to the consternation of the nurse in attendance, he proceeded to recount to the old gentleman his morning's work.

Sir Peter was wrapped up in flannels; his face was very red; his eyes were streaming. His face grew redder still, his

eyes streamed worse than ever, as he listened to Lance's description of "the mass of work" he had got through in a quarter of an hour.

"It'll take weeks to undo the mischief you've done," he moaned, and then his cough stopped him.

Lance vanished discreetly before the combined wrath of Madge and the nurse.

Madge volunteered her services in the way of opening and assorting letters.

"I can at least send temporary answers and tell everybody to wait till you're well again," she said, soothingly.

"The very thing, Madge; the very thing," cried Sir Peter, all serenity once more. "You open my letters—no one else, remember—and tell every one they shall have my entire—mind, my entire attention so soon as I get about again. Any letters of importance put carefully on one side

in the right-hand drawer of my secretaire—lock it up and keep the key yourself.”

And then he coughed incessantly again, and had to eat black-currant lozenges for the rest of the afternoon.

As Madge crossed the gallery leading from Sir Peter's room, she paused at a big flowering myrtle that nearly filled a window-recess. Letting her eyes wander for one moment to the outside greenery and flower-garden, she was conscious of a sensation as physically painful as the scent of the myrtle was physically pleasant.

Yet it was nothing very much out of the common that met her view—merely Lance arranging sketching stool and easel on the green sward below the terrace, under the shade of a big sycamore, whence a good view could be had of the magnificent sweep of mountain scenery without daring the heat of an afternoon sun.

Now, purely as a matter of common-sense, Madge ought to have been delighted at Miss Shore's promptness in endeavouring to carry out her wishes. And as for Lance, well, she had seen him scores of times performing the same office for the numerous young ladies who had fallen in love with the mountain scenery, and had forthwith conceived the desire to caricature it in wishy-washy colours on a square of paste-board.

Yet, nevertheless, Madge, as she noted the graceful, undulating outline of the dull gray figure against the shining background of a laurel hedge, and the lingering assiduity with which Lance adjusted the easel, had to do battle all over again with the unaccountable prejudices with which the very first sight of a beautiful face had inspired her.

CHAPTER XIII.

MADGE, true to her promise, seated herself after breakfast next morning at Sir Peter's writing-table, informing Mr. Stubbs of her intention of opening the invalid's letters and dictating their replies.

Mr. Stubbs, all obsequious attention, seated himself in his usual place at a smaller table at her right hand.

Madge's prejudices had made themselves heard respecting Mr. Stubbs as well as Miss Shore. She had conceived for Sir Peter's private secretary an intense dislike, the ground of which did not seem to be covered entirely by the fact of her having

discovered him in what appeared to be a listening attitude.

She had tried to imbue Lance with her notions, hoping that from his wider experience of men and their ways she might get wherewithal to substantiate her shadowy repugnance to the man.

"I am sure he is sly and underhand," she had said; "and he looks and looks at me whenever he comes near me, as if he were taking stock of everything I do or say, or think, even."

Lance had characteristically laughed off the idea.

"I never knew any one like you for taking fancies into your head," he had said. "Why, if I lived twenty years in the house with the man, it wouldn't occur to me to notice whether he turned his eyes up or down, this way or that. He writes a good hand, and he does what

he's told to do, and what more in reason can be expected of him?"

Madge was not a bad woman of business when she gave her mind to it. She ran over one-half of Sir Peter's correspondence lightly enough, dictating brief and temporary replies; Mr. Stubbs's pen failed to keep pace with her fluent dictating, so, as he wrote, she continued opening the remaining letters, and mastering their contents.

One among those Lance had been too lazy to give his attention to, had an Australian post-mark.

"Dear me! Sir Peter's fame has reached the antipodes," was her mental comment as she broke the seal.

But when her eye had mastered the first few sentences, mental comment she had none to make, for the simple reason that her brain was in a state of chaos.

It was a bulky letter, some two or three

sheets in length, but was written in a round, schoolboy's hand, which rendered it easy reading.

It was dated from "Rutland Bay Settlement, Western Australia," and ran as follows :

"SIR,

"I must beg your indulgence for the liberty I am taking in thus addressing you. The remarkable circumstances I have to communicate must be my excuse.

"Let me begin by stating that I am a minister of the Wesleyan persuasion, and sole spiritual adviser of the rough but not unkindly miners who constitute the scanty population of this place ; also that my statements can be very easily substantiated by reference to some of the leading members of the community, whose names I subjoin.

“Now for my story.

“Sixteen years ago, when this settlement consisted in all of fifty souls, there occurred during the equinoxes a terrible wreck on this coast. A vessel went down with all hands, in the night—at least, so it was supposed from the spars and wreckage washed on shore at daybreak. Something else besides spars and wreckage was washed up with the tide—a portion of the mainmast, with a woman and an infant lashed to it. The woman appeared, from her dress, to be a nurse; but she had been so terribly injured during the gale that she died as soon as she was brought to shore. The child was a fine little boy of about a year old, dressed as a gentleman’s child. His linen was marked simply with the initials G. C.

“All, this, sir, occurred about ten years before I came to the colony. When I, by

the direction of our Conference, took upon myself the office of shepherd to these stray sheep, this infant had grown into a handsome boy, and was of so strikingly-refined an appearance, that so soon as I set eyes on him assisting the miners in the lighter portion of the work, I asked the question :

“ ‘ What gentleman’s son is that ? ’ ”

“ The miners who had sheltered and brought him up were the roughest set of men I had ever lived among ; but, for all that, had treated the boy with the kindest consideration, had taught him to read and write, and had, on account of the extreme fragility of his health, allowed him to lead an almost idle life, evidently looking upon him as one cast in a different mould to themselves.

“ I took the boy in hand immediately on my arrival in the settlement, supplied

him with books, and carried his education as forward as possible.

“So much for the boy. Now for the sequel to my story.

“About six months ago a vessel put in here, a Canadian trader, manned by a crew of divers nationalities. One of the seamen, a Scotchman, by name John Rutherford, had a strange story to tell. He said that sixteen years previously he was serving on board a Mexican passenger-boat, which had been wrecked off this coast. He, with some others, had taken to the boats, and, after many perils, had been picked up by a Canadian schooner. Subsequently, he had joined the Canadian merchant service. He gave full particulars concerning the terrible wreck of the Mexican boat, and the names of the passengers, so far as he could remember them. Among them, he said, was an English gentleman, a Mr. Gervase

Critchett, and his wife, a South American lady, and infant boy, who had hurriedly taken flight from La Guaya, North Mexico, on account of an insurrection threatening there. Rutherford spoke of the father's despairing agony at his inability to save his wife and child, of his lashing the nurse and the boy with his own hands to the mast, and of his frantic endeavours to make his wife leap into the boat as it pushed away in the darkness. Rutherford related also, that on the previous night, when the gale had first burst on them, Mr. Critchett had taken him on one side, and, in view of possible danger to himself and the chance of his child being saved, had related various particulars concerning himself—that he was brother to Sir Peter Critchett, of Upton Castle; that his marriage had been solemnised at the British Consulate at La Guaya, and his

boy's birth had been duly registered there——”

“Madge, Madge !”—at this moment said Lance's voice just outside the door—“are you going to shut yourself up with the ink-bottle all the morning? Can't you come for half an hour's canter?”

Madge started. Her thoughts were far away from Upton, among the wild miners of Australia, and yet, if the truth be told, the under-current of those thoughts carried but one name in their depths—Lance's, and Lance's only.

Instinctively she jumped from her chair and met Lance at the door. It would have been too dreadful, it seemed to her, if, without a word of warning or kindly preliminary hint, he had stood behind her and had read over her shoulder the story which gave Sir Peter an heir to his name and to his wealth.

"I can't ride to-day," she said, steadying her voice as well as she could. "I mean to work all the morning at Sir Peter's letters, and then I have to drive with Lady Judith to Lower Upton."

"How white you look, have you a headache?" interrupted Lance. "Look here, Madge, I want to show you my last new fowling-piece, it came down by the first train this morning." And there and then, outside in the hall, he exhibited his latest acquisition in deadly weapons, unscrewing and putting together again its internal arrangements, descanting meanwhile in enthusiastic fashion on its vast superiority over all others he had ever been possessed of.

Madge's thoughts were in a whirl. It was with difficulty that she managed to keep up a fair show of interest in Lance's talk. She trembled for the safety of the

letter, which, in her haste to intercept Lance, she had thrown open on the writing-table.

She went back in five minutes' time to the study to find the letter folded neatly in half with a paper-weight on top of it.

She flashed an inquiring glance at Mr. Stubbs, who sat, pen in hand, waiting for further instructions.

"The wind fluttered it off the table," he said, quietly, by way of explanation. "The draught is very great when the study-door is opened as well as the outside door."

Madge felt the impulse to ask the question, "Did you take advantage of the friendly draught and master the contents of the letter?" almost irresistible. Her eyes and flushing cheeks asked it plainly enough; but Mr. Stubbs's pasty, expressionless features made no sign, and his eyes appeared fixed on nothing at all.

She had no more ideas to bestow on Sir Peter's correspondence. Everything in life had shrunk into insignificance beside the baleful tidings which those few sheets of closely-written paper had brought.

CHAPTER XIV.

“LANCE is a beggar!—a beggar!” Madge sat in her own room saying the ugly words over and over again. In good truth, for the moment she was incapable of any other thought. The news might be glad tidings enough to the childless Sir Peter, it might thrill other hearts with all sorts of pleasant possibilities. For her it had but one meaning: the man for whose happiness she would gladly, at any moment, lay down her life, was no longer to be the favourite of fortune which she had delighted to think him. His sun had set.

Once more she took up the letter, thinking that she would slowly and care-

fully read it from beginning to end, and see if she could find in it any excuse to doubt the veracity of the writer.

But the task was beyond her. Her hand shook so that she could scarcely hold the thin, crackling paper, and her eyes in sympathy with her hand got at the evil sentences in snatches only.

She read a string of names, at the end of the letter, of those persons who were willing to vouch for the credibility of the writer; the address of John Rutherford, the Scotch seaman; then her eyes glanced higher up the page to where the writer made an earnest appeal for an immediate reply. "For," he said, "the lad is strangely disturbed at the thought of having kith and kin of his own in the dear old mother-country, and is in a state of nervous tremor lest his father's people may not see fit to stretch out the hand of welcome to

him." Then away from this her eyes darted to the signature at the foot of the page, "Joshua Parker," and then her hand dropt to her side, and her eyes refused to do farther work for the tears that blinded them.

Outside her room in the corridor sounded Lance's voice once more in its cheery and somewhat domineering baritone. What was he saying? Something about "my horses," "my dogs"? Evidently he was giving to his servant a succession of orders to be transmitted to the stable, for presently there came, in reply to some question addressed to him by the man, a remark respecting last winter's sleighs. "They were not worth putting in order. I intend to have one—two, perhaps—made on quite another model. The sleigh of the period is far from being what it ought to be."

"A beggar! a beggar!" she repeated,

bitterly. This man, born and bred in the lap of luxury, was to be bidden to go forth and make his way in the world, or else be bidden to remain in his old home simply to play the steward, or live as a dependent on the bounty of others! Ah! would to Heaven the blow had fallen on her, not on him. She had been a born pauper; had known how to fill the rôle of *protégée*, at least not discontentedly! If all the Cohen wealth had disappeared in the night like so much fairy gold, she could have gone back to her early life as one "to the manner born."

And here Madge's conscience gave her as sharp a wound as any its barbed arrows had ever dealt. "Oh, you with your fine flourish of words," it seemed to say, "you, who would pray to fortune, 'give him my lot and give me his,' why didn't you put your pride and your vanity under a bushel

six months ago when he asked you to marry him? If you had seen fit to do this, your wealth by now might have been his, and this blow, though heavy, would not have been a deadly one."

"If I could but have known! if I could but have known!" she moaned, beating her hands together once more.

Through the gloom of this thought there struggled a faint ray of hope. The "No" she had then spoken was not meant to be final, was not likely so to be unless something very unforeseen occurred between her and Lance—here a passing, a very passing thought was given to Miss Shore and her easel. Very well, then, her retraction of that "No" might be hastened somewhat or even might be volunteered—so in her impetuous longing to be of service to him it seemed to her—without loss of dignity or womanliness.

She and Lance were on the best and easiest of terms; it would be easy for her to say: "Lance, my pride and sensitiveness are ridiculous, and always have been ridiculous. I only wish I knew how to trample them under foot and be done with them for ever." Lance, no doubt, would readily enough see the drift of her confession, and would speak over again the words that he had found so easy to speak before.

Till this was done she resolved that she would communicate to no one the contents of the Australian letter, and she thanked Heaven for the fortunate conjunction of circumstances which had made its hateful news known to her before any one else in the house.

"If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly," was Madge's brief summing up of her long hour of painful thought as she nerved herself to

the doing of a deed that had more than a spice of heroism in it.

She folded the letter, locked it up in her desk, and then still farther to ensure its safe-keeping, slipped the key of the desk on to her watch-chain.

She had to pass a looking-glass on her way downstairs. She carefully turned her head away from it. "No," she thought, "if I look in there my courage will be gone, and the words will never be said."

A self-congratulatory thought followed. It was: "I have always said I would give all the Cohen wealth to be really beautiful. Now I would not give up the Cohen wealth for all the beauty under the sun."

And for one brief moment Madge felt as if she had turned the tables on her fortune.

She searched in vain for Lance in his usual haunts; library, study, smoking-room,

gun-room, all were deserted. Then she went on to the billiard-room, hoping for better luck there; it was vacant like the other rooms, cool and pleasant, ruled with bars of light which filtered in through the half-turned Venetian shutters. Something else besides those bars of light filtered in through the shutters, the sound of voices from the outside verandah.

Lance's voice first caught her ear:

"Fate—believe in fate? Well, yes, in one way I do. I believe it is possible for a man once in his life to come upon his fate in the shape of a beautiful woman."

A beautiful woman! Madge had no doubt to whom he was speaking. For one brief moment she once more balanced the Cohen wealth against personal beauty. That woman outside there in the sunshine assuredly was what nine men out of every ten would call beautiful; and she here in

this darkened room had the town and the country house, the diamonds, and the horses. If Lance were to hold the scales, which way would they incline? A dark cloud overshadowed her. She struggled with her jealousy and her prejudices once more. Of course, the words he had spoken as mere words were worth nothing. If he had said them to a man, or to a woman old enough to be his mother, they might have been taken as a simple statement of a simple fact. But spoken to a woman young enough to be his wife, and dowered with good looks into the bargain, they would—well, mean just whatever his eyes chose to put into them; and she knew well enough how Lance's blue eyes could double the meanings of his phrases at times.

Madge went back to her room with her heroic deed undone.

CHAPTER XV.

SIR PETER had a relapse. He was sleeping so peacefully one evening, that nurse and doctor, growing confidential over their patient's idiosyncrasies, fell to congratulating themselves that the worst of the illness was over. Sir Peter was always a picture when he was asleep.

"He looks that smiling and child-like," said the nurse.

"It's such a blessing to see him at rest," sighed the doctor.

And lo ! that very minute his head was off his pillow, and he was out of bed before any one could stop him, vowing that he had the cramp in both legs, and must "walk it off."

“He has driven in the rash,” said the doctor, trying to explain matters to Lady Judith, “and may think himself lucky if he gets about again in three weeks’ time.”

Lady Judith heard about one quarter of what the doctor had said. She only gathered that Sir Peter, as usual, had been lively and insubordinate, and wanted taking in hand.

“I’ll go up and talk to him,” she said, fanning herself and the doctor very hard. “No one knows how to manage him as I do——”

“No, no, no!” shouted the doctor at her. “He mustn’t be worried; it’ll put him into a fever——I mean,” he corrected himself, “your fan would give him his death of cold.”

Lady Judith fanned harder than ever. She only caught the word “fever.”

“Fever!” she repeated. “You told me distinctly it was measles he had. You’ll be telling me next it is small-pox, or rheumatic gout, or something else extraordinary.”

The doctor tried in vain to explain. Being a short man, he got upon tip-toe in his eagerness to do so.

All in vain! Lady Judith fanned him out of the room, and through the hall, and out at the front door, all the while expressing her surprise, her “unqualified surprise, that he had not taken more pains to diagnose the case before he had pronounced so decided an opinion in the first instance. But I don’t believe it’s fever—no. If the whole faculty of medicine were to swear it was fever I wouldn’t believe them. Do you think I don’t know measles when I see it? There isn’t a disease you could name that I don’t

know. So I beg, doctor, if you've any respect for yourself or your profession, that you won't come near me again with the word 'fever' on your lips."

The doctor mentally registered a vow that he would not.

Before he could get out of ear-shot, however, he heard Lady Judith announce with great emphasis her intention of taking the sick-room under her own immediate supervision, and of keeping a steady eye alike on patient, nurse, and doctor.

There followed a rather bad fortnight for all three.

That fortnight came as a reprieve to Madge; it gave her breathing time. It was a weighty secret that she carried about with her. For two whole days she had felt herself almost crushed by it, and had only by dint of vigorous effort preserved an outward appearance of calm. Then she

had awakened with a start, saying to herself that there was no time to be lost, and thanking Heaven that she was bound in honour not to communicate the evil news to living soul until Sir Peter had been put into possession of it and had resolved upon his course of action.

Possibly, by dint of vigorous entreaty, he might be induced to keep the secret from Lance till a certain definite provision had been made for him. This she knew, though it had often been talked about, had not as yet been done, Sir Peter always saying that her marriage with Lance should be the signal for setting the lawyers to work upon a handsome settlement for him, so that his income might be something on a par with hers. Madge, no longer anxious to repudiate Sir Peter's mediatorship, was beginning to feel now that this marriage and this settlement could, with a very

good grace, be arranged by him before the contents of the Australian letter were proclaimed abroad. Once, however, let Lance know his changed position and she felt sure that his pride would stand in the way of both marriage and settlement.

In the meantime, all she could hope to do, while awaiting Sir Peter's recovery to health, was to try and keep matters between her and Lance on that easy, pleasant footing against which in her caprice she had rebelled as savouring too much of the familiar bond of a brother and sister.

A terror that can be proclaimed from the house-top sits lightly enough. It is the one that is locked up wordless within the heart that feeds "on the pith of life." Madge's secret told on her good looks. Even Lance, though he had seemed of late strangely self-absorbed, noticed it.

"What is it, Madge—headache?" he asked one morning over the breakfast-table, while Lady Judith, high over their heads, was delivering an oration on the degeneracy of the dairy-maid of the period.

Madge flushed scarlet.

"That means I am looking particularly ugly this morning," she thought, contrasting in her "mind's eye" her own sallow complexion with the ideally beautiful colouring of that "girl in gray."

To divert his eyes, as well as his thoughts, she made a sudden, abrupt announcement. It was :

"I think I shall open my house in Belgrave Square this year for the half-season."

Now, that "house in Belgrave Square" had been a fruitful cause of squabbling between Lance and Madge.

Whenever she had been particularly bent on making herself disagreeable to him, by way of revenge for an unusual amount of teasing, she had been in the habit of tightening her lips, and saying, "I shall open my house in town this year and see a little society."

Whereupon Lance had never failed to reply: "There'll be the mischief to pay if you do, Madge, unless you set up a duenna at the same time. You'll get a mob of impecunious young idiots dangling after you, and I shall be called upon to administer a caning every other week."

To which Madge had never failed to retort, that "She adored boys—impecunious or otherwise—and that she had serious intentions of weeding from her visiting-list every family where the men were over two-and-twenty."

But there was to be no mimic skirmish over the town house now. Lance had drifted into dreamland, and seemed to get his thoughts back from their travels with difficulty.

"It does seem a pity," he said, a little absently, "that that comfortable house should be shut up, and you have to stay at an hotel whenever you want to run up to town."

"They won't use their arms, my dear, that's what it comes to! And when the butter isn't what it ought to be it's the fault of the butter-worker, or the milk, or the cow, or the clover, or goodness knows what," flowed in the running stream of Lady Judith's talk between the two.

Madge, keeping a steady eye on Lance, saw that not she, nor her town-house, nor yet Lady Judith's typical dairy-maid, had a corner in his thoughts. His eyes were

fixed on the garden-picture which the window facing him framed, with what seemed to her an expectant look in them.

"Shall we ride this morning?" she asked, suddenly—sharply; determined to awaken him to the fact of the existence of such a person as Madge Cohen, and that she sat at his elbow.

Lance jumped up from the table.

"So sorry, Madge—I have to be down at the kennels in half an hour—now Uncle Peter is laid by, I'm bound to see to everything; and when I get back I'm afraid you'll find it too hot for a canter."

But he did not get down to the kennels in half an hour's time, for Madge, compelled to a solitary ramble, and standing for a moment at the front door to call her dogs for company, heard his voice in conversation with Miss Shore, who was seated on the terrace at her easel.

Miss Shore's broken English reached her ear first :

"I can't do it," she was saying in a troubled tone. "When I look at these mountains, other mountains rise up before me and shut out these. Grandeur, gloomier mountains, with one bright evil star shining out of the purple clouds. I could paint those—not these."

"Well, then, why don't you paint them?" said Lance's voice in reply. "They would be bound to be worth looking at. Paint out what is in your eyes, and then you'll be able to see what is outside them."

Then he caught sight of Madge under the stone porch, reiterated the necessity that existed for his presence at the kennels in half an hour's time, and departed in all but breathless haste.

This little incident, with a divergence of

detail, repeated itself again and again. To her fancy he seemed to be perpetually leaving rooms as she entered them, going out of the house when she came in, and *vice versa*. When she wanted to talk he appeared to prefer silence, and when she grew thoughtful and reserved he would suddenly become loquacious and lively, or, worse still, would stimulate Lady Judith's powers of conversation to such an extent, that the room would become intolerable to Madge with her distracting burden of thought.

It was no wonder that Madge, with wits sharpened by the necessity of the case, and prejudices stimulated by her jealousy, speedily fixed upon that "girl in gray" as the likely cause of Lance's eccentric conduct, and was ready to anathematise herself for finding pretext for prolonging the young woman's stay at

the Castle, in weak compliance with Lance's wish.

It was no wonder, also, that with eyes once turned in that direction, that "girl in gray" grew to be an object of special attention to Madge. She found herself perpetually watching her, scrutinising her every action, look, speech, with eager, yet unsympathetic eyes. And the more closely she watched her the more of an enigma she grew to her.

Since the one memorable evening that Miss Shore had exchanged places with Madge at the dinner-table, she had not once sat down with the family to any of their meals. Her breakfast was taken to her in her own room with the morning paper as its invariable corollary. About luncheon-time she would appear outside on the terrace with her easel and painting accessories, and there she would sit until

failing daylight put an end to her work, when she would go back straight to her room, where light supper of some sort was by her orders taken to her.

Madge, looking over Miss Shore's shoulder once, was surprised at the slow progress which the mountain picture was making, in spite of the evident ease and skill with which the artist handled her brushes and colours. Half her time she seemed to be washing off her colours, not washing them in.

That one occasion of looking over Miss Shore's shoulder was made memorable to Madge by the sudden start the girl gave, and the frightened, yet withal angry look which swept over her face.

"Why do you do it—you startle me? Come in front if you wish to speak to me!" she cried, vehemently. And there and then she removed her chair, placing it

with its back to the house, and leaving no room for a passer-by.

Madge related this circumstance to Lance, watching his face closely for tell-tale change of expression.

Lance seemed to feel her scrutiny, and tell-tale expression there was none.

"Much ado about nothing, as usual, Madge," he said, lightly. "Don't you remember the terrified jumps you used to give if ever I came behind you at your singing and joined in a bar or two?"

"Yes; but I never turned on you as furiously as she turned on me, or sat with my chair with its back to the wall so that no one should ever get behind it again!"

"Miss Shore, I dare say, is of a very nervous temperament, and has——"

"A guilty conscience perhaps," interrupted Madge. Then the minute the words were out of her mouth she regretted

them. They would just put another stone to the wall that seemed to be building between Lance and herself, and possibly make that "girl in gray" and her eccentric doings a sealed subject between them.

"Had a great deal of trouble, I was going to say," said Lance, walking away at his last word in order to prevent farther parley on the matter.

"She came into the house like a shadow, she falls between us like a shadow! Would to Heaven she would depart in the same shadowy fashion," Madge thought bitterly.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Cohen, for intruding," said Mr. Stubbs's voice at that moment at her elbow, "but I believe one of Sir Peter's letters, which I handed to you the other day, had an Australian post-mark on it."

"Yes, what of it?" asked Madge, sharply, her looks at once betraying the

fact that this letter was of vivid interest to her.

It was invariably difficult for this young woman to speak lightly and think heavily. To look tranquil when she felt like "a cauldron stirred by witches," was an impossibility to her.

"I merely wished to say," Mr. Stubbs went on respectfully, "that the Australian mail goes out in three days, and if a provisional answer is necessary——"

"A provisional answer is not necessary," said Madge without a moment's hesitation, giving not so much as a thought to the fragile, sensitive lad at the other end of the world, who was in "a state of tremor lest his own kith and kin should not hold out the hand of welcome to him."

CHAPTER XVI.

ONE way or another, affairs seemed very much at sixes and sevens at the Castle just then.

For one thing, Sir Peter's illness upset all their autumn plans—a trip to Biarritz for Lady Judith and Madge, Lance's grouse shooting on the Scotch moors prior to a fortnight's fishing in Norway. For another, the spirit of Queen Mab herself seemed abroad in the house, and every one appeared to be doing just exactly the particular thing that was to be least expected of them.

Madge, embroidery in hand, sat in her rocking-chair under the "dark-green layers of shade" of the old cedar on the lawn,

watching a whole pageant of fantastic fleecy clouds sweeping across a deep-blue sky before a strong current.

“That’s us to the life just now,” she said to herself emphatically, though ungrammatically. “There’s a mermaid—look at her fish-tail!—riding on a tiger! There’s a big white cat with a Gainsborough hat on his head. Here I come! There’s a huge four-wheeled triumphal-car with nothing but a stupid little swan to draw it. No, that isn’t me either. A swan is a very beautiful creature; also I’m not trying to drag anything along at the present moment; no, I only wish I could make one thing stand still—for ever. Here’s a great snow mountain just toppling over, and there’s a poor little bat stretching out its wings to protect something. What is it? A teacup? a pigeon’s egg on end? That’s me to the life—the bat, that is;

ugly enough and trying to do impossibilities with its stupid little wings!"

Madge's train of thought had been set going by two little incidents of that day's occurrence, in which the chief actors had conducted themselves as uncharacteristically as could well be imagined.

Incident number one had been a little speech of Lance's, made à propos of nothing at all, so far as she could see.

"Madge," he had said, with a sudden energy which set her thoughts ranging upon wild possibilities, "what an unlucky beggar I am never to have had a profession given to me! Now, supposing I were ever to offend Uncle Peter in any way, and he were to cut me off with a shilling, how on earth could I get my bread and butter? I should have to turn either groom or gamekeeper! 'Pon my life I don't think I'm fit for anything else."

Incident number two had occurred during the reading of Sir Peter's correspondence, to which Madge devoted punctiliously two hours every morning. It cost her a huge effort to do this, and she never broke a seal now, without a chill quaking as to the news that seal might secure. Mr. Stubbs, as a rule, sat a model of respectful attention during the reading of those letters. He never uttered a syllable unless addressed, when his words in reply would be discreet and few. On this particular morning, however, Madge had no sooner taken her place in Sir Peter's chair than he began to talk, and the subject of his talk was himself and his family.

"I have had a letter this morning, Mrs. Cohen," he began, "which has greatly distressed me."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Madge, round-

eyed with a sudden terror lest the subject of the Australian letter might be circulating from other quarters.

“I don’t think I ever mentioned the fact to you that I have a son—Roger by name.”

Madge drew a long breath of relief; her slight bow, however, in acknowledgment of the communication, expressed but the faintest interest in the “son—Roger by name.”

Mr. Stubbs, however, felt sufficiently encouraged to proceed.

“This son, I grieve to say, has been one continual source of anxiety to me. He has had loss upon loss in his profession—that of a ship and insurance broker—and is now threatened with bankruptcy by his creditors unless I can get together a certain amount to meet his present difficulties.”

Madge was not disposed to invite farther confidences.

“Will a cheque for twenty pounds be of any use to you?” she asked, by way of cutting the matter short.

“It would be of use, and I should be grateful for it, Mrs. Cohen,” he replied, drooping his eyelids till the eyes beneath showed not as orbs but as slits. “But I hope you won’t mind my saying that a cheque for fifty pounds would be of much greater use, as the sum we have to get together is rather a large one.”

If the armed warrior in bronze, who surmounted the clock on the mantelpiece, had suddenly descended from his pedestal and asked her to valse with him, Madge could not have felt more surprise than she did at this unexpected request. It was not made in Mr. Stubbs’s usually obsequious fashion, but rather stated bluntly, as a matter of fact that must be patent to all.

She was always inclined to be free-handed

with the Cohen gold, but she did not choose to have it demanded of her.

"I will think over your request," she said coldly, as she went back to her letter-reading.

And she did think over his request, as also over Lance's startling tirade on his incapacity for earning his bread and butter; but the only results to her thinking were the fantastic forms she evolved from the clouds—a sort of picture-poem of life at the Castle at the moment.

From where she sat beneath the cedar she could catch a glimpse between the shining laurel leaves of an opaque patch of gray skirt, which at that distance represented Miss Shore at her easel.

That gray skirt was, as it were, a stumbling-block to the wheels of her thoughts every time it caught her eye; just, too, when she wanted those thoughts to be

working at their hardest and smoothest. So she turned her chair slantwise, shutting it out from her view.

It was too hot to finger her embroidery ; her silks, a tangle of soft colours, slipped to her feet on the grass. A faint south wind blowing over the orchard, brought with it the scent of ripening fruits. Overhead, the great, golden, brooding clouds hung low.

Madge, with half-shut eyes, rocked herself backwards and forwards ; now the tangled colours of the silks caught her eye, anon the golden, brooding clouds. Now the coloured silks were up in the sky, a many-tinted rainbow ; now the full-breasted clouds were at her feet, blotting out the green earth, and transforming the whole garden-picture into a cloud-fresco in carnations and azure that Murillo might have painted as a background to his ascending Virgin.

Those clouds and the rocking-chair

together sent her into dreamland. Her eyes, full of the sky, drooped.

She opened them, as she thought, in a beautiful garden ; a garden scarcely to be realised out of fairy-fable, for the light poured down from the sky on it like some great falling rainbow, transfiguring trees, flowers, and green sward into all sorts of marvellous hues. Lance stood beside her.

“ Is this Eden ? ” in her dream she thought she said to him. But even as she asked the question, a dense, gray cloud settled down upon the fairy garden like a great fog, and all the beautiful colours died under it. It came a misty bulk between her and Lance, and she saw him no more. Only his voice, far away from out the cloud, came, saying, “ Madge, Madge, help me ! ”

Madge awoke with a great start. Yes, there was a voice at her elbow, not Lance’s,

however, but Mr. Stubbs's; and, instead of begging for her help, he was as usual making apologies for disturbing her.

"But old Donald, the grave-digger," he went on to say, "was here just now gossiping with the gardeners, and he gave me this, thinking it might belong to some one in the house, for there's no such outlandish name as the one marked on it known in the village."

As he finished speaking he held out to her view a lady's pocket-handkerchief. It was trimmed with lace and had the name "Etelka" embroidered in one corner.

Madge scrutinised the lace. It was unlike anything she had ever seen before—something of an old Greek pattern worked in Mechlin thread.

Mr. Stubbs's face said, "An I would I could!"

His lips said :

"I told Donald that to the best of my knowledge no one at the Castle possessed such a name."

"Where did Donald find it?" queried Madge.

"He said under the yews in the churchyard."

"Leave it with me, I'll try to find its owner," said Madge, always inclined to abridge intercourse with Mr. Stubbs as much as possible.

He bowed and withdrew.

Madge sat staring at the handkerchief with the outlandish name in the corner.

"There's only one person here likely to own to that name," she thought. "And it suits her infinitely better than the plain English name she sees fit to mask under."

She looked towards the corner of the garden where Miss Shore had been seated at the easel. Now should she take the

handkerchief to her at once, ask if it were hers, and what could be the object of her solitary rambles in the churchyard?

Miss Shore, however, together with her easel, had disappeared. Second thoughts assured Madge of the uselessness of such a course. A cold, expressionless "No," without change of feature, would, no doubt, be the only result to the plainly-put question, "Is this yours?"

Better keep it awhile; find out a little more about it; ask Donald himself as to the exact "where" and "when" he had found it. She was not disposed to trust Mr. Stubbs implicitly in either small or great matters, and had no wish to show him that the handkerchief had any special interest for her.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Cohen," said Mr. Stubbs's voice, at this very moment, "but may I ask if you have had time to think over my request of this morning?"

Madge's reply was a cold and repressive
"I have not."

Mr. Stubbs again bowed, and withdrew.

He made half-a-dozen steps down the gravel path and came back again.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Cohen," he said, respectfully as before, "but perhaps you have forgotten that the Australian mail goes out to-morrow. If the letter addressed to Sir Peter is of any importance, it might be as well to acknowledge it."

Madge had it in her heart to ask a string of questions, such as : "What is this letter to you? What do you know of its contents? How dare you keep thrusting yourself and your affairs upon my notice."

She controlled herself with difficulty, saying merely :

"The letter requires no acknowledgment whatever."

CHAPTER XVII.

MADGE had a lonely dinner that night. A message was brought to her that Lady Judith had gone to bed with a bad headache, and that Lance, who had gone out driving in the afternoon, had sent back his dog-cart with the intimation that he should most likely dine with Lady Brabazon—their nearest neighbour—and walk home afterwards.

Madge as much as possible curtailed her solitary meal. It was not a particularly cheerful one, eaten in that big dining-hall, with the “eight - and - twenty Critchetts looking down” on her.

After dinner she wandered out to her

favourite twilight haunt—the terrace, with its grand double landscape of sky and mountain, valley and plain.

The after-glow lingered yet in sheen of mother-o'-pearl athwart a limpid stretch of tender green sky. A veil of night-blue mist was slowly spreading itself over the valley, adding a mystery and poetry to it which in gairish sunlight it never knew. Madge, without much stretch of imagination, could have fancied it some land of enchantment sinking slowly—slowly into the earth whence it had been evoked by magician's wand.

Her thoughts, however, in their restless turmoil soon brought her from the poem of shining sky and shadowy valley back to commonplace, hard-featured prose. Lance was the key-note, the beginning, end, and middle of those tumultuous thoughts. The echo of the cry, "Madge, help me!"

which she had heard in her dream, seemed to ring in her ears yet. Help him! Why, her heart was all one prayer to be allowed to do so. Years ago she had stood on one side—had thrust herself out of his path, as it were—by marrying David Cohen, in order not to mar his future. Should she stand tamely by now, and see him blight that future with his own hands?

Here it was that Madge no longer beheld the fading glories of the after-glow, nor the mysterious valley under its night-blue veil seeming to sink slowly into the heart of the earth again. Her eyes instead, for their own torment, conjured up a picture-gallery in which Lance's face and form in endless repetition did duty for a hundred. Now he was standing gazing with surprised admiration at a girl lifting a gray gossamer veil; anon he was seated facing that girl with an intense eager interest shining out.

of his eyes. After these came all sorts of scenes in which his face, together with its admiration and interest, had a kindly sympathy and pity written upon it.

At this point Madge's ears became filled with other voices than those of the thrushes among the sycamores, chanting their hallelujahs to the dying day. Lance's voice, in pitiful pleading for the forlorn stranger, rang in them instead.

And coming always as a refrain to these thoughts, persistent as the echo to the hammer on the anvil, was the bitter self-accusation that once, not so very long ago, Lance's fate had been in her hands, and she had had the privilege of making or marring it with a single word.

Here Madge's society became too much for her. A short sharp walk she felt before daylight closed in, would be the quickest way of putting an end to that

hateful iteration in her ears of "Half your own doing, Madge Cohen, half your own doing."

The handkerchief with the foreign name on it afforded her a pretext for a ramble. Old Donald, the grave-digger, as a rule spent his summer evenings in St. Cuthbert's churchyard, trimming graves or sweeping paths. She would like to put to him direct a question or two as to the finding of this handkerchief. Old Donald had keen eyes and ears; perhaps in addition to answering her questions, he might be able to give her some little information as to when and for what purpose Miss Shore haunted the old burying-place.

It was a walk of about half an hour that Madge proposed to herself. She made that half-hour twice its length with the fancies she crowded into it. Like the old Indian, who painted a vivid picture

of the little man who stole his venison, together with the bob-tail dog, merely from seeing a foot-print in a dusty road, Madge constructed a whole life history for Miss Shore out of the name embroidered on the pocket-handkerchief, which had not yet been identified as hers.

St. Cuthbert's church was built on a rocky headland about a mile and a half distant from the Castle. It commanded on its western side a magnificent view of the rolling Irish Sea, whose rough breezes had battered its gray walls for close upon two hundred winters. On its eastern side it was reached by a steep winding road direct from the valley. The larches, which drooped stately branches here and there over the stony path, had gone to a dusky olive tint as Madge wound her way upwards. At the end of the road the low, gray stone wall of the church showed bleak

and bare from out the deeper gray of shadowy waving grass; above it, the stone tower rose a dark square against the yellow zone which belted the horizon.

The place of tombs looked weird and desolate as Madge entered it. The sea-wind blew over it, ruffling the long grasses on one or two forgotten graves, and setting a group of aspens that over-shadowed the lych-gate whispering and shivering. There was not a sign of old Donald anywhere. Madge wandered in vain down the by-walk which skirted the low, gray wall. An owl flew from out the tower with a harsh cry, an old yew—black against a white tombstone—creaked in the sea-breeze. Other sound there was none.

Madge felt that she had had her walk for nothing. Twilight was falling rapidly now; the gold had died out of the yellow zone

which belted the horizon; a white ocean-mist—itself a great silver sea—came surging up behind the church-tower. Overhead here and there in the limpid gray of the sky, a star, like a tiny diamond spark, would catch the eye, twinkle—vanish—shine out again.

Madge turned her face towards the lychgate, thinking the sooner she got back to the house now the better. She had walked a little of the bitterness out of her thoughts, but somehow—she could not say exactly how—the sadness in them seemed to have deepened. She felt tired—chilled by the mist and the weird loneliness of the place.

“Good times, bad times, all times pass over,” she could fancy those voiceless dead were preaching to her from under their grassy mounds.

How still the graveyard seemed to have grown! She could hear the twilt twilt of

the bats as they flitted in ghostly fashion round the belfry window. Even the light fall of her step on the gravel seemed to waken echoes from the other end of the long, dim walk.

But were those the echoes of her own tread? Madge asked herself, pausing under the shadow of a tall monument, white against the gray of the sky.

The sound of voices, which came nearer with the supposed echoes, answered her question in the negative.

Madge, prompted by impulse, rather than by any definite purpose, shrank behind the tall, white stone as two long, dark shadows, falling athwart her path, heralded the approach of a man and woman. Their voices came to her clear and distinct through the stillness of the evening air. Madge's ears needed not to be told who were the owners of those voices.

“Lance and that girl in gray!” she said to herself. And after that the dead might have crawled from under their grassy mounds, and in their grave garments have preached their sermon to her; but she would not have heard one word of it.

Lance was evidently in as light-hearted a mood as usual. “We’re early,” he was saying as he came along. “‘There’s husbandry in heaven, their candles are’—not yet lighted. Last night we had better luck.”

“Last night, last night!” repeated Madge, a great wave of jealous anger sweeping over her. “That was why, then, he did not come into the drawing-room last night! why he gave short, absent answers to my questions, and looked and walked like one in a dream.”

For a moment the dim churchyard and ghostly white tombs grew misty to her.

Her ears even refused to perform their work, and Miss Shore's answer was a blank to her.

Not so Lance's next sentence. His voice in nearer approach rang like a clarion in her ear. It was :

"I haven't forgotten a word of what you taught me last night. I know which are the benefic planets and which the malefic ones, and I know that all the malefic planets are setting and all the benefic ones are rising. And that means that those who have hitherto been unlucky will forthwith begin to have a real good time of it, and those who have been in luck before will be luckier than ever."

Miss Shore's voice in reply, by contrast with his light tones, sounded grave to absolute solemnity.

"Why do you laugh in the face of fate as you do? Evil stars are rising, not

setting. You may be born to good luck—I do not know—but others are born to ill-luck—to be evil, to do evil. It is no laughing matter.

There was one behind that tall tombstone, at any rate, who found it no laughing matter.

Lance's tones suddenly changed to an earnestness that sat strangely upon him.

“You are right,” he replied, “there is a time to laugh, and a time to weep; and I'm confident if I knew one quarter of the ill-luck you've had to go through, I should feel far more inclined to weep than to laugh over it. But you won't give me the chance! You keep your lips sealed; you reject help; reject sympathy even.”

He was standing still in the middle of the path now facing his companion. Madge could have stretched out her hand and touched him as he stood.

The words themselves expressed naught beyond the kindest sympathy. Madge herself—any Sister of Charity—might have spoken them to any poor, forlorn outcast who came in their way. But they would not have sounded as they did on Lance's lips. He put another soul into them with his eager, heated, impassioned manner. That, not Madge nor any woman living could have so much as mimicked.

Miss Shore's pale face flushed into sudden animation under it. Her words came hurriedly, nervously, not with their usual cold, slow emphasis.

"You do not understand," she answered. "My ill-luck is not a thing past and done with, I take it with me wherever I go; it is written here," here she touched the palm of her hand. "An evil star is in the ascendant now, in three weeks' time—three

weeks from to-night—it will be in opposition to my ruling planet.” She broke off for a moment, then added in solemn, though still tremulous tones: “If that day passes over my head in peace I will talk no more of fate, no more of ill-luck. I will look up at the stars and will laugh in their faces.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

“LANCE, I’ll undertake never to do it again. No—not if I live to be a hundred.”

It was Sir Peter’s first day downstairs. He was getting a breath of fresh air and “a little exercise,” by walking up and down the big inner hall of the house, every one of whose long Gothic windows stood wide open.

Lance, on his way through the hall, had stopped to congratulate the old gentleman on his release from the sick-room.

“No, I dare say you won’t do it again—catch the measles I suppose you mean. It

would be rather difficult to have them a third time, wouldn't it?" he said, in response to Sir Peter's energetic assertion.

"No, no, no! That goes without saying. I mean get out of bed again in the middle of the night to walk off the cramp. I say, Lance?" this was added in a tone that signalled an interesting communication at hand.

"Yes, what is it?" answered Lance.

Sir Peter walked on tip-toes to the door, looking right and left, came back again and peered out of one of the windows.

"Down at the farm," said Lance, answering the action as well as the look on the old gentleman's face, which said plainly as words could, "Where is she?"

Sir Peter drew a breath of relief.

"Broughton has ordered me away—to 'complete the cure,' he says, and—and—and Lady Judith insists on carrying me

off into Devonshire on a visit to some of her people !”

“ Oh, well, if she insists, there’s no more to be said. Submit, and be carried off.”

“ But—but I don’t intend to be carried off, and, what’s more, I won’t be carried off. No, I won’t—I won’t,” said Sir Peter, irritably, working himself into what Lance was generally pleased to call a “pucker.”

“ Well, then, I should say you won’t, and stick to it if I were you.”

“ Yes, yes, of course, exactly. That’s what I intend to do,” said the old gentleman with dignity, as if it were his invariable custom to treat Lady Judith’s behests with out-spoken resistance. “ And I was thinking, Lance, that a little trip to town with you—say for a week, or ten days—would be far more likely to do me good than a dreary fortnight in the wilds of Devon.”

“Town in August! Heugh!”

Sir Peter read his own wishes into that shudder. “Well, of course it would be a little hard on you to ask you to lose a week, or ten days, of Madge’s society,” he began silyly.

But Lance interrupted him. “Get that notion out of your head at once and for ever, Uncle Peter,” he said, peremptorily. “I’ve told you a dozen times over that Madge hasn’t the faintest liking for me, and that I don’t intend to worry her any more on the matter.” He broke off for a moment to give time for the sly look to die on Sir Peter’s face. Not a bit of it, it remained as steadily fixed on his happy, infantine features as if it had been stereotyped there. “Talk away, my boy,” it seemed to say. “But, for all that, I know what I know.”

Lance grew more and more exasperated. “Look here, Uncle Peter, listen to reason.”

he began. Then he checked himself. As well talk logic to the eight-and-twenty Critchetts who smiled down on them from the walls as to Uncle Peter, with that wise look peeping from under his eyelids, and that sugary, benignant smile curving the corners of his mouth. Besides, a sudden idea had at that moment occurred to him. A few days in town alone with Uncle Peter would suit very well a plan that was hatching in his brain.

The notion that he was "an unlucky beggar," because he had never had the chance of a career in life offered him, had not died so soon as he had given utterance to it to Madge. On the contrary, it had been slowly gathering strength. What he had said to Madge he was in effect repeating to himself in one form or another all day long: "Suppose I were to offend Uncle Peter utterly, irretrievably, and he

were to cut me off with a shilling, how on earth should I get my bread and butter?" It would be a splendid idea to get Sir Peter all to himself for a day or two, and have a little serious talk with him on one or two matters.

So he mastered his inclination to combat Uncle Peter's wise look and sugary smile, and instead said, a little condescendingly, perhaps, "Make it three days in town, and possibly I may be able to manage it."

Sir Peter rubbed his hands gleefully. "I felt sure you would when you thought it over! You see at the longest we can't be away very long. My birthday, as you know, will be on the twenty-first. Well, I must be home at least a week before that to see that everything is going on all right—people want so much looking after—do you remember last year that tent suddenly giving way at one corner—that was the

only one I hadn't given an eye to while they were driving the pegs in. It's wonderful to me, truly wonderful that——"

"Let's get back to ways and means," interrupted Lance, striding after Sir Peter, who was just completing his thirtieth measurement of the long room, and now stood in the door-way. "Look here, Uncle Peter, let's have a trot together, and arrange our affairs while we take our exercise. Now, then! what if Aunt Judy insists on accompanying us?"

But the mere suggestion of such a possibility brought Sir Peter to a standstill at once.

"Not to be thought of for a moment," he said with a fine air of decision. "She would have to be reasoned with. You might do it, Lance—you have great influence, very great influence, I may say, with her. You might explain to her

that—that she couldn't very well be away from Upton just now with so much to arrange for—for the ball on my birthday—that Madge would be lost without her—that her farm just at this time of year requires——”

“I have it!” interrupted Lance. “The farm's the thing! you write to that man in town who keeps her supplied with farm implements, and tell him to send down the latest sweet things in incubators or butter-workers. And then tell that other man at Carstairs to send over a dozen or two of Houdans and Crève-cœurs, and what's that other leggy sort—Brahmas? That'll do it. The poultry will have to be dieted, and the machines will have to be tested. We're all right now, Uncle Peter!”

Lance's suggestions, with modifications, were adopted. Lady Judith's eyes were

gladdened one morning by the arrival of a small van-load of farming implements, and before the glow of pleasure caused by their unexpected appearance had time to subside, Lance and Sir Peter had packed their portmanteaus and departed.

“So thoughtful of Lance. Sir Peter tells me it was entirely his idea,” said Lady Judith to Madge as she carried her off to the farm to inspect the new purchases. “But there, he is a good fellow at heart—I’ve always said so—in spite of his heedlessness and want of respect for his elders!”

Madge was disposed to hail this trip of Sir Peter’s as arranged by a special interposition of Providence. She had crept out of her hiding-place in the churchyard, and had made her way home through the twilight shadows with but one thought in her mind—that Miss Shore’s visit at the

Castle must be brought to an end with as little delay as possible. The absence from home of Sir Peter and Lance seemed to render this idea comparatively easy of accomplishment. She would take matters into her own hands as soon as they were gone, tell the young lady that she had altered her mind as to the decoration of her boudoir, pay her handsomely for what pictures she had already done, and speed her heartily on her journey to "the North," whether it were to the region of the Arctic Pole or merely to that of North Britain.

Lance would come home and find that the mysterious guest had departed. "Out of sight out of mind," Madge reasoned hopefully with herself. No love-making so far as she knew had passed between the two, although a very fair prelude to love-making appeared to have been sounded. She stifled the angry jealousy that threatened

to rise up in her heart with the thought that the occasion was not worth it. Once let this mysterious and attractive young woman disappear from the scene, and Lance would return to his former allegiance to herself, and things no doubt, by the help of Sir Peter, would be happily arranged between them.

She had come to the conclusion that, until Sir Peter's return, she would not hand to him the Australian letter. Among Sir Peter's numerous child-like propensities was that of proclaiming aloud in the market-place every secret whispered into his ear. He might promise her a thousand times over that Lance should know nothing of this newly-found heir until matters were satisfactorily arranged, and the Cohen wealth as good as handed over to his keeping; but once give Sir Peter up to Lance's sole influence, as would be

the case during a week's stay in town, and his promises would be as tow, or as the green withes wherewith Samson was bound. After Lance's future had been definitely arranged, she would, she said to herself, do penance for her subterfuge by making a full confession to Sir Peter, explaining to him the motives of her action.

So Sir Peter came downstairs, fingered his correspondence, sent the study carpet a little farther on its road to ruin, made the house lively with bell-ringing; in fact, effected generally a transformation-scene wherever he shed the light of his countenance, and finally departed in company with Lance. And the little key which represented a mighty secret hung still on Madge's watch-chain, and the burden of the untold tidings lay heavy on her heart.

"I hope your sketches are getting on

satisfactorily, my dear," said Sir Peter to Madge, as he jumped into the dog-cart and took his seat beside Lance. He glanced in the direction in which Miss Shore and her easel were generally established. "Nice young woman that! Nice to look at; nice to speak to! Wish she'd be a little more communicative though — did my best yesterday to draw her out about herself and her people—she must have people of some sort you know — but couldn't succeed——"

"Chickabiddies all right, Aunt Judy?" interrupted Lance, catching sight of Lady Judith's advancing figure. But his eyes, to Madge's fancy, went wandering over "Aunt Judy's" head in the same direction as Sir Peter's.

Sir Peter had another "last word" to say. It was:

"You'll see to my correspondence while

I'm away, Madge, and it's bound to be all right. You've a capital head for business, though you won't acknowledge it."

The words stung Madge like so many hornets.

"Why should I be made to do an unworthy thing?" she had said to herself two nights before in St. Cuthbert's churchyard, as she resolutely trampled under foot the burning desire to play the listener a little longer. Yet, as the echo of Sir Peter's words repeated itself in her ears, she felt herself to be doing a very unworthy thing in thus withholding his private correspondence from him.

"For Lance, for Lance," she said to herself, hiding her face in the thick fur of old Roy's tawny coat. "We'd die for him—you and I—wouldn't we, Roy?"

Roy, understanding perfectly, licked first her hand inside and out, then her

cheek and behind her ear by way of response in the affirmative.

“And we hate her—both of us, don’t we, Roy?” she went on. “And we’ll do our best to get rid of her! But, oh dear, what if she won’t go—cries and says she has no friends, or hangs about the place till Lance comes back, and then begins her wiles once more!”

Here Roy—like all well-bred dogs, a master of the art of thought-reading—once more expressed canine sympathy.

“Oh for a counsellor!” she sighed. “If I could but turn you into Balaam’s ass and get a word of advice out of you, you dear old thing!”

“Speak of an angel and you will hear its wings,” says the proverb. Madge’s sigh for a counsellor was answered so soon as it was out of her mouth, though not by

the rustling of wings—by the slow, soft footsteps of obsequious Mr. Stubbs.

“I am so sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Cohen,” he began, after carefully shutting the door behind him. “I merely wished to say that when I handed Sir Peter his letters yesterday morning I did not say a word about the important letter you have to give to him.”

An important letter! How did this man know it was important, and what did he know of her motives in keeping it back? Madge wondered, staring at him blankly.

“Yes, that was right,” was all she dared to say, however, hoping that he would consider himself answered and depart.

Not so he. He stood in front of her, surveying her calmly through his half-closed eyes.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Cohen," he began, "but have you given a thought to my little request of the other day, respecting my poor boy and his embarrassments?"

Madge was no match for this man, with his effrontery and cunning. Partly from the wish to get rid of him, partly from fear lest he might betray her secret, she rang the bell and desired her maid to bring her cheque-book.

Mr. Stubbs was profuse in his thanks; they flowed in an unctuous stream, like oil from a pierced olive.

"Does he think I am going to give him a thousand pounds," thought Madge, contemptuously. Her pen paused at the figures it was about to write.

"You said?" she queried, looking up at him.

"I said fifty pounds," he replied without a moment's hesitation; "but if you

would make it seventy, madam, I should be infinitely obliged to you."

Madge's pen, after a moment's pause, traced the words that transferred seventy pounds from her banking account to Mr. Stubbs's purse.

"There," she thought, "I'm paying him handsomely for keeping my secret for a few days. But I'll take good care that Sir Peter gets rid of him so soon as things are arranged a little."

Mr. Stubbs stood in front of her, cheque in hand, executing a series of profound bows.

"You may count on my deepest gratitude—my life-long gratitude, madam," he said again and again.

Madge's formal bow of acknowledgment was intended as a signal of dismissal. He did not so take it. From thanks he passed on to proffers of service.

“If I can at any moment be of the slightest service, you may rely on me, madam.”

And then he suddenly dropped both thanks and proffers of service, came a step nearer to Madge, gave one furtive glance at the door, and said almost in a whisper :

“Does it not strike you as a very extraordinary thing, madam, that Miss Shore should be invariably so anxious to see the morning papers ?”

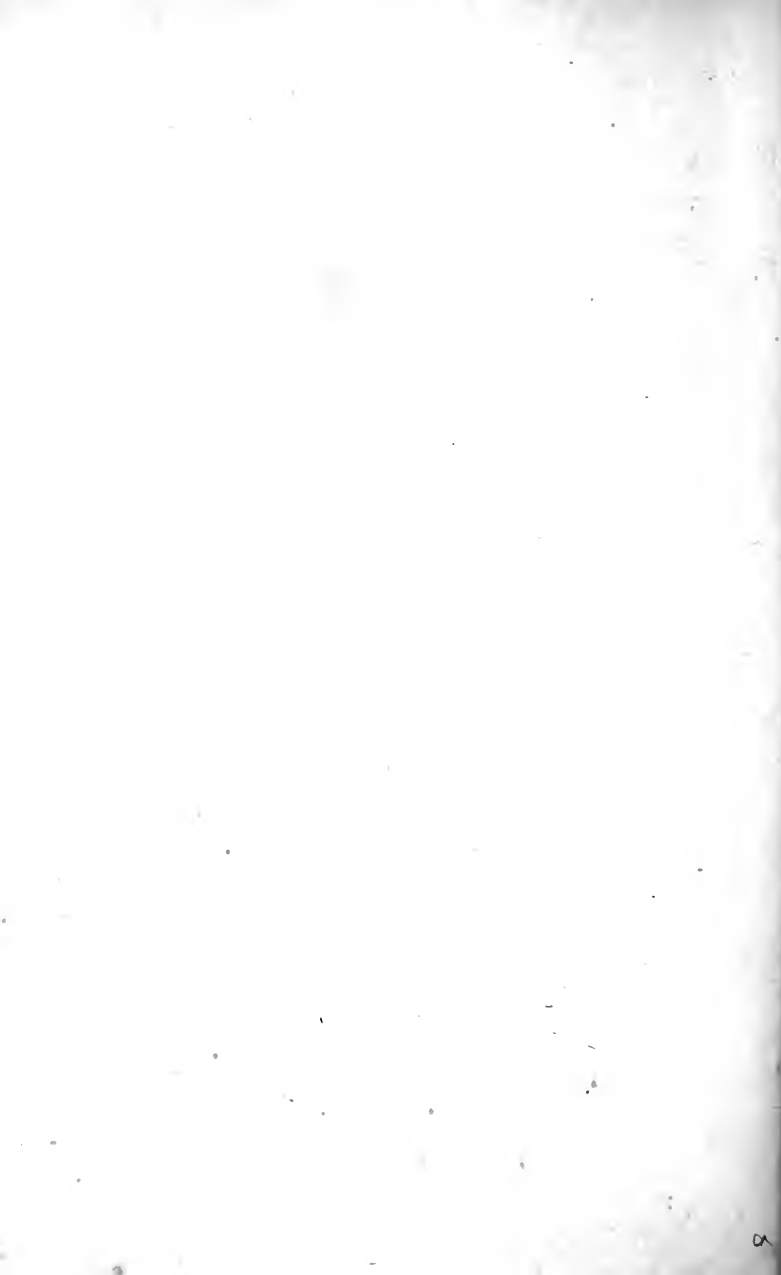
Madge fixed contemptuous eyes on him. It was easy to read his meaning. It was : “I am willing enough to do any amount of dirty work for you provided you keep your cheque-book always handy.”

“Why should I be made to do an unworthy thing ?” was the indignant cry that once more rose up in her heart. Hard-pressed as she might be for counsellors, it

was not to such a creature as this that she would apply for aid.

“I have never given the matter a thought,” was her reply, in tones so frigid that Mr. Stubbs could not but feel himself dismissed, and withdrew accordingly.

END OF VOL. I.







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